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MANCY GANT

"It's rewarding to have your voice heard, which is why I always want to communicate some sort of sentiment through my work," says the portraitist behind Face-to-Face With Toro y Moi, our feature on Chaz Bear. "Can I make you feel what that moment was like?" Gant also collaborated with Bear on the music video for "Ordinary Pleasure," a track off Toro y Moi's latest LP, Outer Peace. Gant's other directing credits include the six-minute short The Falling Man for rapper Duckwrth.



JAMIE NELSON

A jet-setting photographer whose portfolio includes album artwork for Lily Allen and Gwen Stefani, Nelson has also shot for Vogue, Harper's Bazaar and Vanity Fair. Her first PLAYBOY commission, Vice Land, is a lucent ode to the seven deadly sins that gluts her long fascination with the Rabbit. "My house has vintage PLAYBOY art hung throughout," she says, "and my 1968 Mustang is an original 'Playmate Pink' convertible!"

KIMBERLY DREW

Winner of A.I.R. Gallery's inaugural Feminist Curator Award and former social media manager for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Drew will soon release her first book, Black Futures. A champion of black contemporary art, the curator switches her focus to the oeuvre of Marilyn Minter and pleasure in art for Pussy Power. "Experiencing pleasure is about being vulnerable," she says. "To reach ecstasy, one has to undergo surrender. It can be a surrender forged by strength or defeat, but it's a surrender nonetheless."



JELANI COBB

In The Pleasure of Not Being Respectable, the Columbia University professor and New Yorker columnist explores the nuanced relationship between race and indulgence. "So much of what I've written about has related to the pain and difficulty associated with race," Cobb says. "I wanted to look at things from the opposite side. What would the world make of a black hedonist, and how would someone like that even come into existence?"



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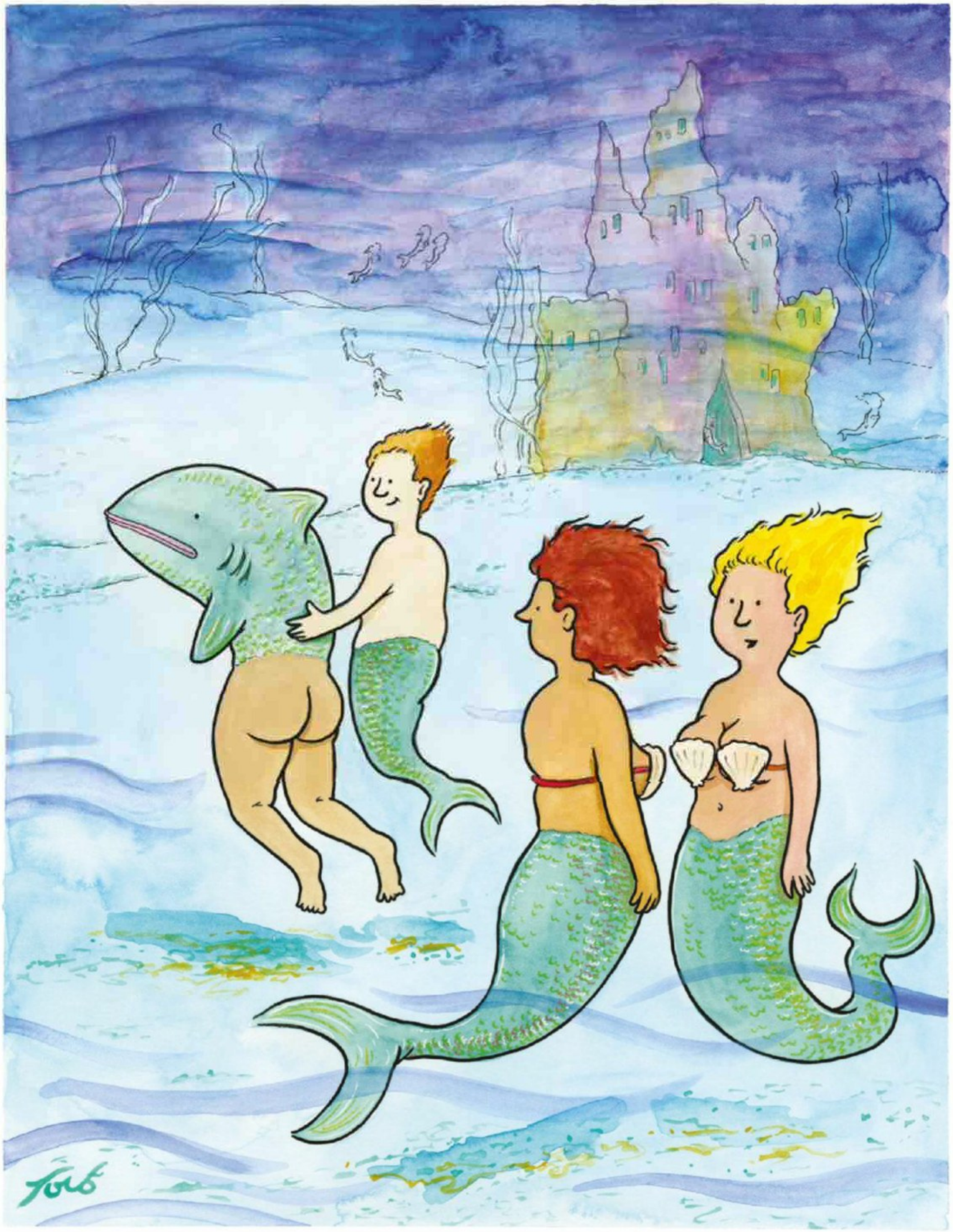
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Kim Kerotika
Photography by Freddy Koh
No 11 | **December 2019**



“He’s an ass man.”


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my pleasure



IF PLEASURE IS LESS POWERFUL THAN PAIN (SPOILER: IT IS), THEN HOW DO WE MAKE LIFE WORTH LIVING?

BY **ADAM CONOVER**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
NICK RASMUSSEN

Pleasure sucks.

I can hear you now: "Adam, you're writing in PLAYBOY, America's foremost publication dedicated to pleasure. Are you seriously going to argue that pleasure, the very feeling that makes life worth living, 'sucks'?"

Yes, I am. Sorry, you velvet-clad sybarites. Pleasure isn't all that great, and the idea that it makes life worth living doesn't stand up to the barest scrutiny.



The problem is that pain is a *lot* more powerful than pleasure. The South African antinatalist philosopher David Benatar points out this fundamental asymmetry: "The worst pains are worse than the best pleasures are good. If you deny this, consider whether you would accept an hour of the worst tortures in exchange for an hour of the most delightful pleasures."

Okay, I'll bite: Would I, in exchange for one hour of supremely satisfying intercourse with a sexually and emotionally fulfilling partner of my choosing, agree to be waterboarded for one hour while a demon slowly peels off my toenails with a pair of red-hot pliers, a stinging jellyfish gives me a titty twister and an Amazonian candiru fish swims up my penis?

Don't know about you — I'll pass.

Because pain traumatizes and injures, its effects linger long after it's felt. Pleasure, on the other hand, is fleeting. As soon as it arises, it's gone.

If I may offer a personal example: As I write this, I'm sitting next to a pool at a hotel in Phoenix. The sun is warm, the wind is blowing, and I have a cold beverage in my hand. If anything is pleasurable, it's this! But tomorrow, I have to get up at four A.M., go to the airport and fly coach, with a layover, to Montreal. It doesn't matter how lovely it feels to dip my piggies in the pool today; tomorrow's going to suck. Once again, pain has the upper hand.

Even if we were somehow able to craft lives for ourselves in which we felt pleasure every waking moment — and in America in 2019, this seems to be the goal of an awful lot of people — we would still never be content. "Sure, this is nice," I think, sitting by the pool, the breeze ruffling my hair, "but wouldn't it be even nicer if it were a few degrees cooler, and if I looked better with my shirt off, and if those kids from Ohio weren't hogging the hot tub? I wish I were richer so I could start my own hotel and ban kids forever! *That* would be the life!" And on and on. Pleasure feels nice, but it never truly makes us happy.

Finally, let's not forget that our pleasure often comes at the expense of another's pain: That fat cat up in first class may be enjoying his lie-flat seat, but is it worth it when its existence means those of us in back are all the more cramped and miserable?

The truth is, pleasure is not a goal worth striving for. So what,

instead, should we seek? I would argue that the answer is *satisfaction*. Satisfaction isn't a fleeting sense of joy or titillation; it's a feeling of abiding comfort, of being free from desire. And it can be achieved not just by improving our own lives but by helping those around us. What's more satisfying than knowing you've done good in the world? And while pleasure is often expensive, satisfaction has no price tag and is available to everyone.

Of course, once you're satisfied, if you have the opportunity to experience pleasure every now and again — knock yourself out! Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go engage in emotionally fulfilling intercourse with the partner of my choice. ■

BEFORE I LEARNED THE MYSTERIES OF SELF PLEASURE, I HAD TO ACCEPT THAT I DESERVED TO FEEL GOOD

BY **MIEL BREDOUW**

"I heard Amanda lies under the bathtub faucet."

I was tucked into my locker after seventh-grade gym, wrangling my sweaty sports bra out from beneath the underwire bra on top of it. I designed this technique so no one could see my nipples. Eavesdropping on my classmates was an unexpected bonus.

"*What?*"

"Like…spread-eagle."

"Why doesn't she use the hand-shower thing?"

"She doesn't have one."

I might have screamed, *"That's not how you're supposed to take a shower,"* if I hadn't been stuck in a two-bra shibari of my own design. Or maybe, *"Is she pregnant with water?"* But I never would have dared ask the only question I actually needed answered: Why?

I wasn't religious. I wasn't even wholesome. I was the one who knew what a blow job was (or, as I learned it, a "blow joe"). I was the one who got in trouble for "swearing like a sailor." I was even the one who proudly told the entire lunch table that I was "pretty sure the applicator thing stays on the outside."

But masturbation? *Whom???*

Slowly, I figured out it was like rubbing that genie lamp inside a cave, except the cave is hip-huggers and also there's no genie. I felt contaminated for even thinking about it. How could it possibly feel good enough to offset the *humiliating* means of getting there, the *cringe-worthy* noises and *grotesque* expressions I might make, the *devastating* judgment if I was ever found out or how *grody* I'd *definitely* feel afterward? But above all was the insidious thought that had haunted me so long it nearly became me:



Who ever said I deserved to feel good?

Maybe I would have felt differently if I'd had a lock on my bedroom door. If I had liked my body. If I had gone to a school with better sex ed. If I possessed even one crumb of selfesteem. If I had become friends with Amanda, or any girl for that matter. If I could have seen *Big Mouth* or *Pen15* or *Booksmart* or any content that normalizes girls pleasuring themselves, for themselves. But I didn't. And so I learned pleasure as something meant for other people.

Shame followed me into high school like the rolling backpack my chiropractor begged me to use. I didn't know it as "shame" then, just as "the truth." I did start dabbling in sexual activity with other people, but I justified it to myself on the grounds that *they* wanted it. I prided myself on being "chill" and "low maintenance" and "so down-to-earth, I'm basically in hell." But me… horny? *Ha ha ha honestly that's really funny because it's medically impossible for me to be horny my doctor told me and you can ask them except like patient confidentiality and actually who told you I was horny because THAT ONE TIME at the assembly when I yelled "Schwing!" I was doing a very funny bit.*

I was so committed to being unburdened by libido that I maintained it for years, without question. I became *The Adult Girl Who Had Never Masturbated* (R.I.P. Stieg Larsson). I even started joking about it — something about my small hands, as if a lack of meaty thumbs and an octave reach exempted me from the bean-flicking draft.

I wish I could say that, one day, some sexy spirit moved me to put on "I'm Every Woman" and finger-blast myself into sensual oblivion. The reality is slightly less empowering: A supportive boyfriend surprised me with a vibrator. Not for him, not for us, just for me. I guffawed, "In what world? I hope they take returns! Why is it so smooth?" But then, in a quiet moment when no one was home, I locked the door, turned off the lights, lit a candle and gave it a try. And all at once, I understood why Amanda had lain spread-eagle beneath the bathtub faucet.

She figured it out at 12. I was twenty-fucking-four. ■


THE
pleasure
OF NOT BEING RESPECTABLE

ON THE BLACK EXPERIENCE OF JOY AND INDULGENCE AND NOT GIVING A FUCK

BY **JELANI COBB**

Somewhere in the sprawling mythos that was his life, John Arthur Johnson — a.k.a. the Galveston Giant, a.k.a. the Big Smoke, a.k.a. Jack — the son of former slaves and first black heavyweight champion of the world, checked into a room at the Seal Rock House in San Francisco. The hotel's tolerance of a colored man, even a great and laureled one, was not to be presumed in the fall of 1909. The primary concern, however, was not the champion but his female companions: Belle Schreiber and Hattie McClay, two white women who were competing for his attention. Johnson, literally an outsize figure, all sinew and ripple, black as a power outage, was singularly free, having concluded that his capacity to whip white men in the ring emancipated him from the other mythologies of white dominion. He would keep company with whomever he chose. Both of them.

It was striking but predictable that this kind of freedom — any kind, really — unsettled the whites and therefore had the same effect among the more cautious blacks. Booker T. Washington— titan, college president and ex-slave — criticized Johnson for his indulgences, for needlessly provoking white men whose anger that a man like him could even exist would surely be displaced onto the shoulders of the rest of the colored people. Having survived the travail of slavery and the onset of Jim Crow, the race, Washington thought, would most assuredly be laid low by some ratio of whiskey, ignorance and the pursuit of white women's vaginas.

This nation has never lacked for scolds, but its black ones have the additional credibility of claiming to offer solutions to a troubled and besieged community. Washington's gospel — the creed that had made him famous and powerful and beholden to white robber barons — held that Negroes were at all times to avoid incurring the anger of white men, that they were to remain outwardly subordinate as a means of surviving in a world not made for them. Johnson, posted up in the Seal Rock, might have asked: If those were the terms, what was the point of surviving at all? The story of the two men is trivial save for the ways their exchanges distilled something bigger and maybe even profound about who we are and how it is we get through our days.

At the heart of the various hierarchies in American life is a kind of tiered access to pleasure. Whatever its form — carnal, narcotic, culinary, aesthetic — pleasure is either more easily attained at the higher social altitudes or its indulgence is far less stigmatized there. It's nearly pre ordained that these scales of joy and indulgence would be bound up in the tangles of race in ways that are both illuminating and contradictory. No wonder then that the *Reefer Madness*–era prohibitions against marijuana deployed the stigma of interracial sex as part of their fearmongering. It's predictable that the recent trend toward marijuana's legalization followed the path of its mainstreaming by white Americans — a pleasure whose consequences always fell asymmetrically along racial lines. The American proscriptions against interracial sex literally predate the nation itself, taking root in the colonies a century before the Revolutionary War. Yet the same architecture of law and custom meant to wall the coloreds off from the joys of American life also made black life obscure, curious and exotic.

The archives of slavery are replete with bullshit rationales coughed up by white men who were forever running up to the slave quarters at night, most often projecting their basest desires onto black women. In the 1920s, white voyeurs overran Harlem, raving that black people and their passionate primitivism were the antidote to the sterility of modern life. In the 1950s, Norman Mailer looked to black people, their jazz, their sex, their etceteras, and found a kind of loose-limbed counterpoint to the uptightness of white American culture. This kind of exoticism tumbled down to the present, manifested in a landscape of interracial porn that turns old ideas on their heads: that black male sexuality can exist as a vicarious thrill, mostly for white people, most of them men. The deepest ancestral prohibition proliferates on the internet, one click beneath the digital surface, in ways that reinforce the old ideas. The attempt to outmaneuver race in this society is not unlike a gambler trying to beat the house: The odds are stacked in the house's favor, and even its losses tend to serve a bigger, long-term victory.

The result is a kind of crossroads effect in American life. The classics of American literature (*Portnoy's Complaint, Howl*) and film (*Easy Rider, The Graduate, American Beauty*) have tended to fixate on the rejection of suffocating societal norms and puritanism. Philip Roth lampooned the sterility of the American suburb, but Lorraine Hansberry centered her most famous play on the struggle of a black Chicago family trying to get a shot at that kind of boredom. For black people, gaining access to the camouflage of mediocrity and normalcy has just as often been the whole point. One side finds heroism in the pursuit of pleasure; the other shrugs it off as a luxury—a thing that might cost you more than it was worth. We Americans approach the matter of pleasure from differing directions.

All this brings us back to the matter of Jack Johnson. He shot back at Washington, clowning him for being beaten over the head in a red-light district where he'd purportedly sought the company of a white woman. Johnson would be beholden neither to white men's fury nor to black men's fears. Life is finite, and pleasure is the balm that makes this fact tolerable. And how you negotiate the terms of that deal, the particulars of your indulgence, is nobody else's business. The logic of Johnson's thinking still holds up more than a century after whatever went down in that hotel room. When confronted with a moral quandary, the wisest course of action is sometimes to simply stop giving a fuck. ■

ILLUSTRATION BY **SACRÉE FRANGINE**

ILLUSTRATIONS BY **KATIE BAILIE**

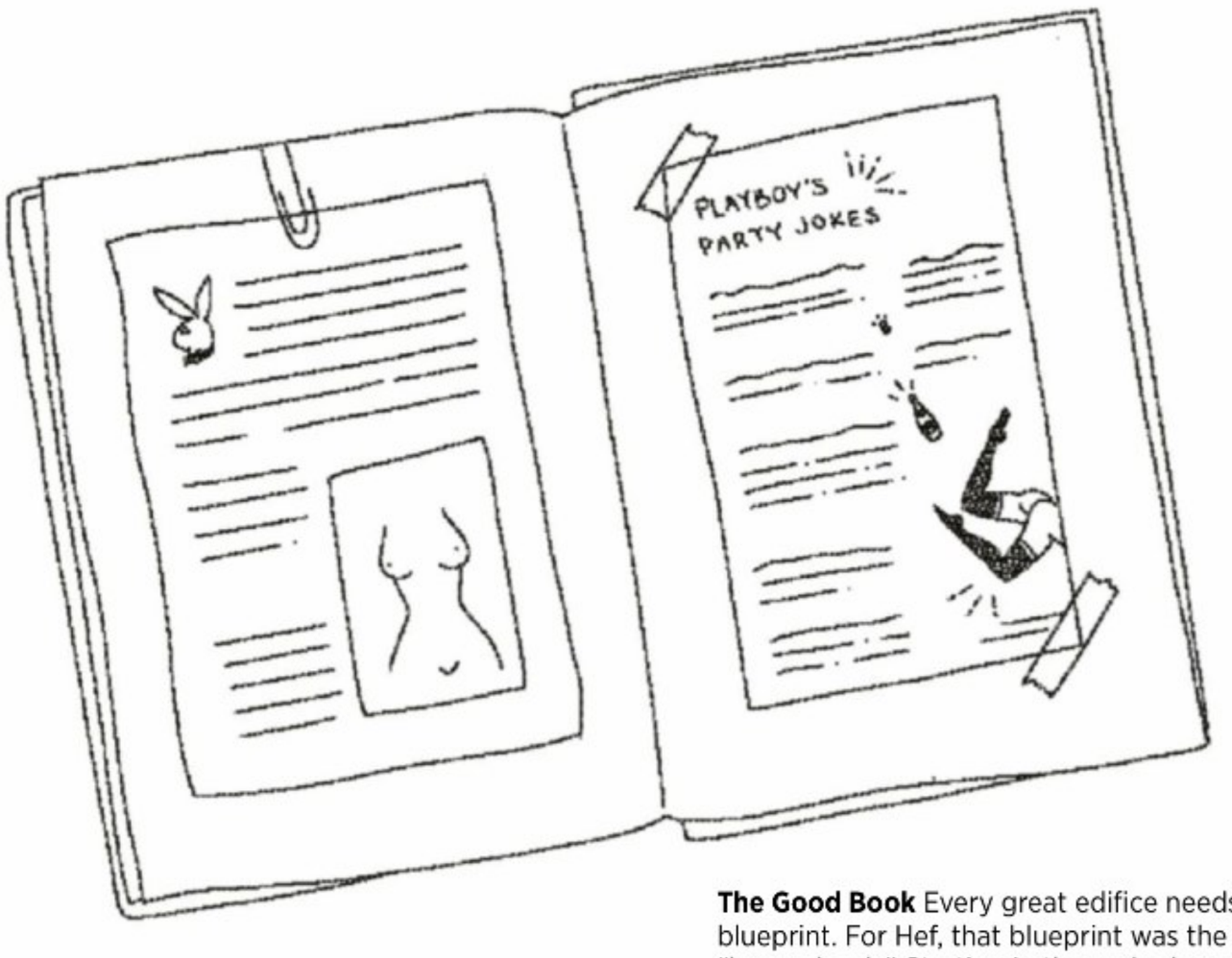
65th

An anniversary is an invitation to relect on years gone by. Naturally, it's also an opportunity to celebrate. So with those two notions in mind, we pause for a moment at the tail end of our 65th year of publication to contemplate and commemorate our remarkable history.

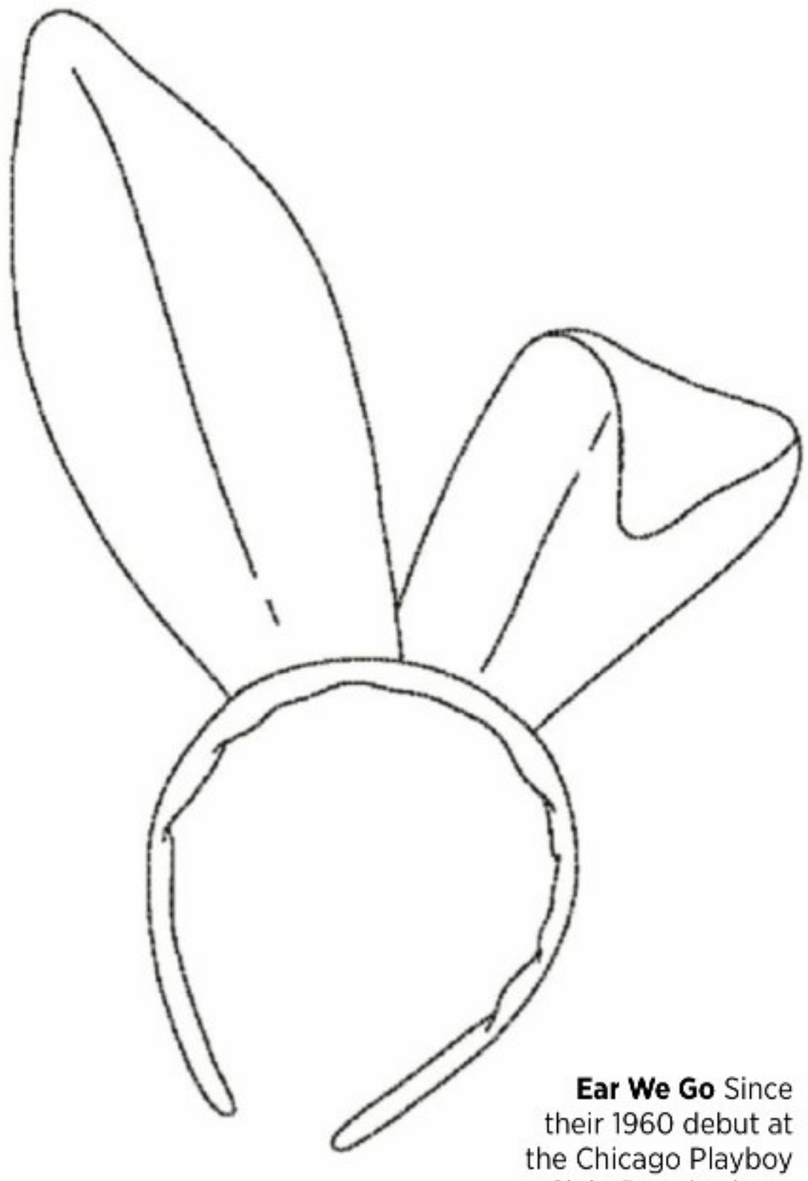
And after six and a half decades, Playboy has an enviable catalog of milestones and memories from which to draw — emphasis, in this case, on draw. Inspired by our past (the satirical *Playboy Coloring Book*, which ran in 1963), our present (*Pleasure*, an erotic coloring book available on PlayboyShop.com and downloadable from the App Store) and our future (which we're certain will be colorful), we hereby give you a curated collection of illustrated treasures. Grab your markers and release your inner artist as you take a brief tour of where we've been. Here's to where we're headed next.



Dreamland The five-and-a-half-acre Los Angeles property was Hugh Hefner's private home, but the Playboy Mansion occupied an outsize space in imaginations around the world. Hef liked to say the public projected its fantasies onto his front door. He also called the place an extension of his personality: welcoming, expansive, hedonistic.



The Good Book Every great edifice needs a blueprint. For Hef, that blueprint was the "brown book." Starting in the early days of the magazine and lasting into the 21st century, a staffer created a butcher-paper paste-up of each issue of PLAYBOY for Hef to flip through, checking the pacing and flow before the real files were sent to press.



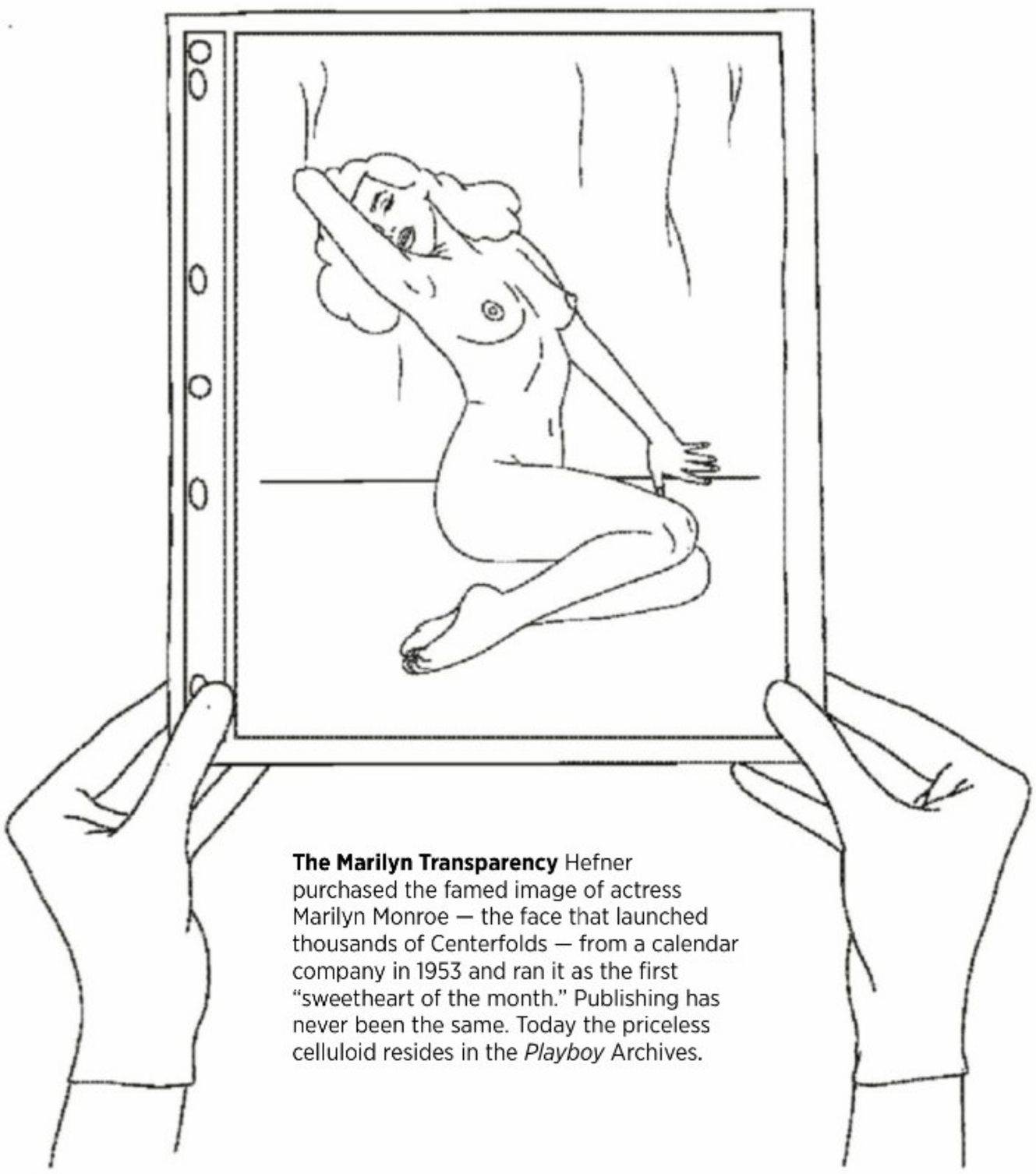
Ear We Go Since their 1960 debut at the Chicago Playboy Club, Bunnies have repped the brand with a decidedly sex-positive attitude. Their revolutionary boldness made the venues an instant success.



Pipe Dreams For just $15 via mail order, readers could purchase "the pipe that Hef smokes"— a briar-wood beauty with an ebony finish. Hef called the iconic piece a prop in his reinvention as a playboy, but that didn't stop him from giving up smoking for health reasons.



Poker Face The 1966 opening of the London Playboy Club, which housed the company's first casino, was a gamble that paid off big — until its gaming license was revoked in 1981. The late 1970s and early 1980s marked a turning point for the clubs, with nearly two dozen locations closing around the world.

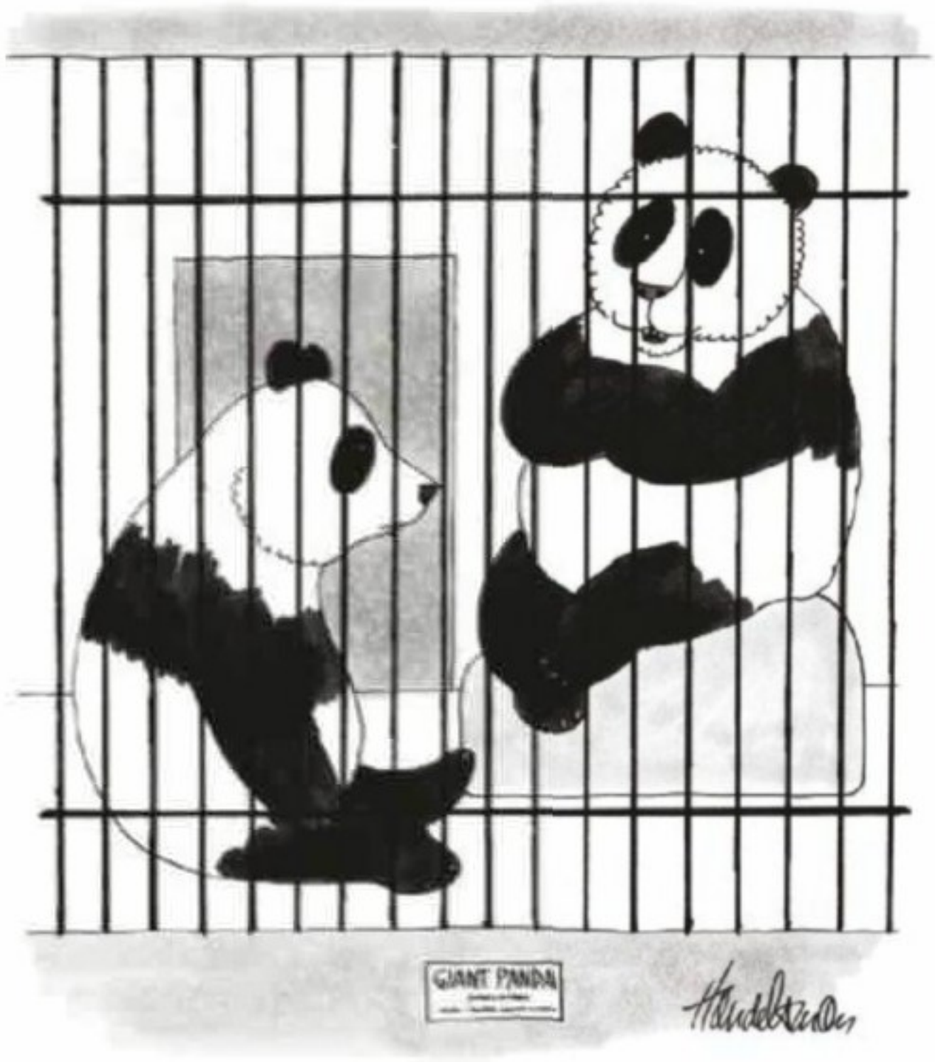


The Marilyn Transparency Hefner purchased the famed image of actress Marilyn Monroe — the face that launched thousands of Centerfolds — from a calendar company in 1953 and ran it as the first "sweetheart of the month." Publishing has never been the same. Today the priceless celluloid resides in the *Playboy* Archives.

CLASSIC



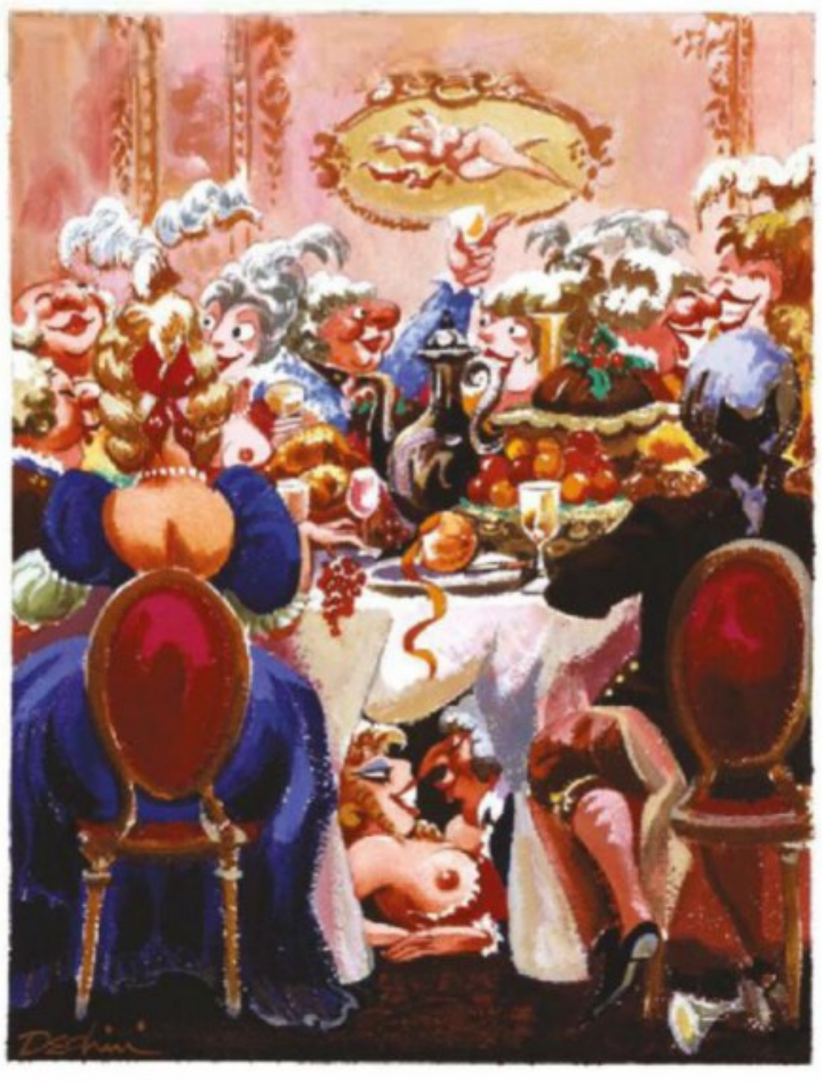
"Well...uh...no, your Eminence...it's not exactly a flying machine."



"If, as you say, it's no crime to be a panda, perhaps you can explain why we were arrested."



"Naughty girl!... Have you been peeking?"



"I think we should be getting back before we're missed."

CARTOONS



"Hear me, and hear me good, kid. Unroll the condom all the way to the base of the erect penis, taking care to expel the air from the reservoir at the tip by squeezing between the forefinger and thumb."



"Look at the corner apartment on the 12th floor. That's what I want you to do to me."



"This evening's program consists of Brahms, Mozart, Strauss and a rap piece commissioned for this occasion."



"I have to leave before midnight, but I have time for a quickie."



KARLEE

Lauryn

Model @PLANETKARLEE

Photography by MARUF HOSSAIN @PAINT.A.POSE
MUA IVETTE NOEMI @I.NOEMI


CKET
TER HORSE
SWORTH ☆ CA



Tell us a little about yourself.
I'm a huge animal lover, no matter what kind of species. I'm a very sensual woman and I love massages and just being touched softly so I can feel all of the vibrations coming off from that one persons energy. I'm a huge yogi and weight lifter, yoga really helps my body & I'm able to practice my flexibility each class. I recently launched my own online website & store; PlanetKarlee.com where I curate trending fashions as well as have magazine covers on T-shirts and other collectibles.

What do you enjoy most about what you do?
I love when the spot light is on me and getting into the heat of the moment with a photographer or videographer, it's the best feeling in the world. My most favorite is walking onto red carpets and there's about 30 photographers in your face saying your name, it's an incredible experience.

What is your greatest life achievement thus far?
Building my own website with a store, and also getting my first Playboy International cover in 2018.

What would you say is your best feature?
I love my back dimples on my lower back and my calves. A lot of people tell me my best feature is my personality.

What makes you feel sexy?
Body rubes, dancing & singing gives me goose bumps because I have a sexy voice.

What advice would you give to women aspiring to get into modeling?
Be yourself, own that camera lens and don't forget to use your eyes & switch up the modeling position after each flash so you're not looking at the same pose each photo when going to choose favorites.

Favourite Shoot Location?
Costa Rica!

Do you prefer kissing or cuddling?
Both, but kissing more.

What are you really good at?
The splits both ways, making people happy & smiling.

What is one thing people may be surprised to find out about you?
I'm originally from the labeled number one ghetto town in Nebraska.

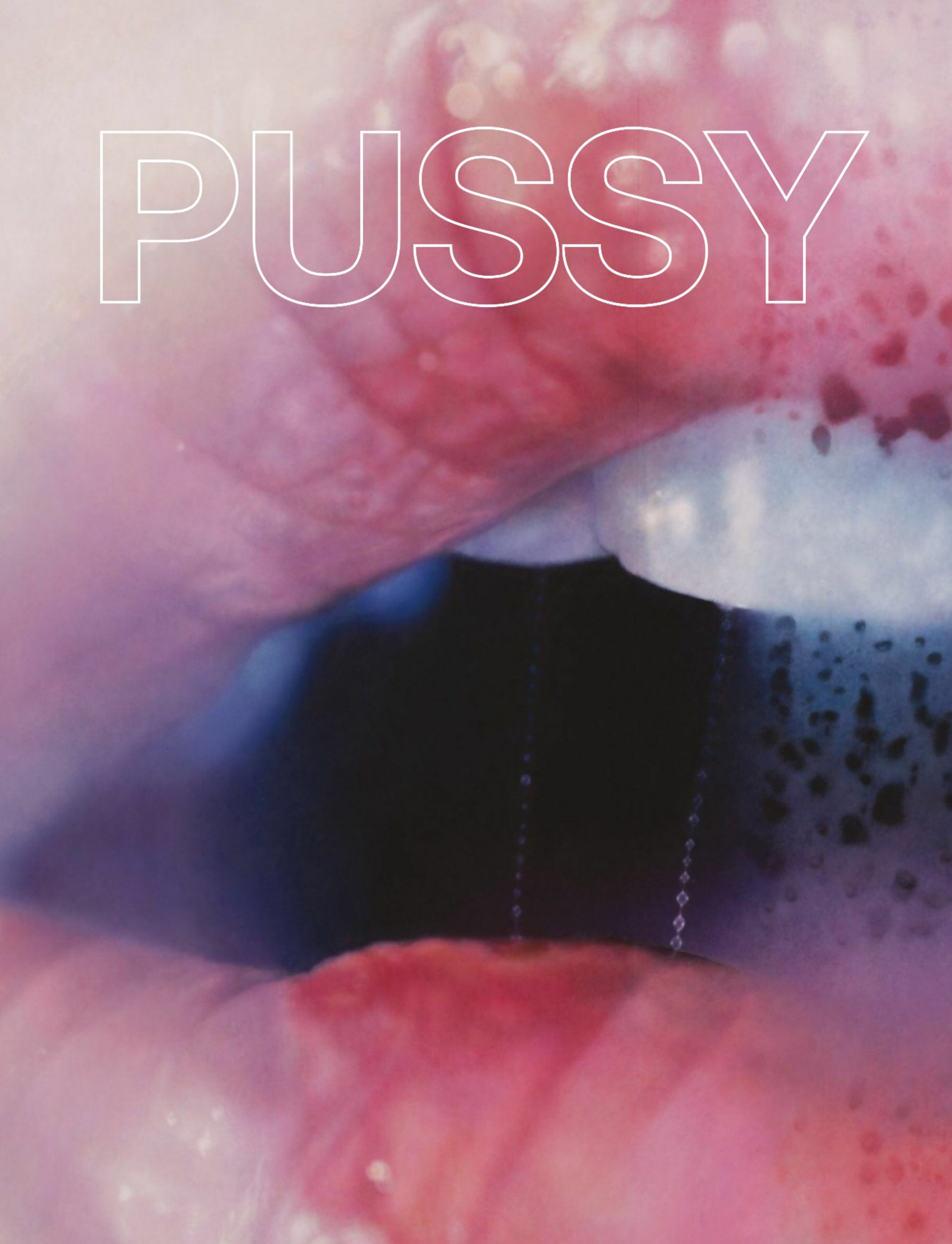
Do you have a catchphrase?
"Can I get a ho-yeahhh"










PUSSY

POWER

Marilyn Minter has been thoughtfully shocking people for 50 years. Here, the legendary artist shares never-be-forepublished work and weighs in on the importance of defining pleasure on one's own terms

BY **KIMBERLY DREW**

When I arrive at Marilyn Minter's studio in midtown Manhattan for our interview, I'm reeted with an iced coffee and the artist's favorite chocolate chip cookies. Minter wears a RESIST T-shirt, a d esign c ollaboration with the grassroots political organization Swing Left. "Resist" has become a rallying cry in this political moment; for Minter, a lifelong activist and vocal proponent of reproductive rights, the campaign is just one example of how the multimedia artist uses her practice as activism. (I wore a MY BODY, MY CHOICE shirt from the emerging fashion designer Collina Strada, quietly hoping Minter would think it was cool.) The sartorial choice is a testament to how Minter suffuses every choice she makes with intention — from her outfits to her chic studio layout to the sustainable straw in my compostable coffee cup.

My fascination with Minter's work began when I was in college, when images from Tom Ford's fall-winter 2007 collection popped up on my Tumblr dashboard. I knew very little about Ford and even less about whoever had taken the photos, but I was seduced by their grittiness. In one shot, the designer devours a soft pink cake; in another, a model covered in rain — or sweat — purses her lips as she gently caresses her glasses. Unlike more traditional fashion photographers such as Steven Meisel or Annie Leibovitz, Minter produces images that aren't about the products or the models — they seem to speak directly to the viewer's instinctual desire.

The 71-year-old artist has always explored beauty and pleasure from unexpected vantage points. Born in Shreveport, Louisiana and raised in south Florida, Minter did not spend her early life on a crystal stair. In her 1969 series *Coral Ridge Towers*, shot while she was in college, we get a glimpse of her opioid-addicted mother at home in Fort Lauderdale. "In Florida, we were in the land of no parents," she says of her and her brothers' strained relationship with their mother and father. In the black-and-white images we see their mother, splayed across her bed, applying makeup and taking pleasure in her own gaze. At first glance these images, which won the praise of pioneering photographer Diane Arbus while she was visiting Minter's school, could just as easily be portraits of a retired Hollywood starlet; instead they provide an intimate look into Minter's past. "I knew she'd pass out and never get out of bed and always wear nightgowns and float around," Minter says of her mother. "It was all this kind of bastardized glamour." That glamour would remain a key motif in Minter's practice for the next five decades.

Although not exactly a household name, Minter is widely respected in the arts community, first gaining notoriety in the 1980s through a series of exhibits at the feminist gallery Gracie Mansion and later by receiving a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship, in 1998. Since then, her photographs, paintings and videos have been shown in galleries and museums around the world, including at the 2006 Whitney Biennial.

Unlike many of her peers, Minter boldly straddles fine art and commercial art. She refuses to be relegated to one way of making, or presenting, her images. In her 2006 work *Shit Kicker,* for example, she takes the idea of "shoe porn" and presents a model in snakeskin stilettos kicking up mud. As the model's ankles torque, you wonder if she's being dragged back to a dancing partner or pivoting toward freedom. In 2016's *Deep Frost* (pictured opposite, bottom left), we see a tongue pressed on frozen glass. The tension is palpable as the icy landscape is cleared by the heat of the model's breath. Few other visual artists are so committed to the erotics of the everyday or to the sticky sweetness of what it means to be alive.

Minter has also left her mark on pop culture, working with the likes of Miley Cyrus, Lady Gaga and Pamela Anderson. In 2007, she shot Anderson for the European art magazine *Parkett*. "I took all her makeup off and gave her bangs," says Minter. "I want women to have images of themselves for their own pleasure and amusement." In 2008, she collaborated with the legendary streetwear brand Supreme on three skateboard decks. Minter's 2009 video *Green Pink Caviar*, which depicts a woman's tongue languorously swirling green liquid candy around a sheet of glass, served as a backdrop during part of Madonna's "Sticky and Sweet" tour; the eight-minute video was later displayed on digital billboards above Sunset Boulevard and Times Square. *Gossip*

"Art history has always sanctiied women. I want them to be sexy, sensuous and beautiful." **Opening pages:** Big Mouth, 2017. **Opposite, clockwise from top left:** Chin Up, 2019; Big Breath, 2016; to be titled (work in progress); Deep Frost, 2016 (all enamel on metal and previously unpublished).













"NOBODY HAS POLITICALLY CORRECT FANTASIES."

Girl fans may recall the large-scale Minter pieces in the van der Woodsens' foyer. And in 2013, Minter had a dancing cameo in Jay-Z's star-studded "Picasso Baby" music video. (Both Madonna and the Carter family are Minter collectors.)

Minter's studio practice has also aimed at reaching new audiences in unexpected places. Back in 1990 she purchased air time during *Late Show With David Letterman*, *The Arsenio Hall Show and Nightline* — at a cost of $1,800 per 30 seconds — to promote her *100 Food Porn* exhibition at the Simon Watson gallery, reportedly becoming the first artist to advertise on late-night television.

In her 2016 museum retrospective *Pretty/Dirty*, curated by art scholars Bill Arning and Elissa Auther (selections from which are featured in these pages), Minter presented a comprehensive look into her practice without shying away from work that wasn't received well critically. Take her 1989 *Porn Grid* series, composed of rasterized pop art paintings of men and women giving blow jobs. The images, all inspired by real porn, were immediately rejected by some of her feminist allies. "Nobody has politically correct fantasies," she tells me. "And there was this giant anti-porn movement happening because of Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin. They really wanted to ban any sexual imagery whatsoever, and I love porn." Rather than turn away from complicated subject matter, Minter chose to see her work come to fruition in its rawest and truest sense.

Minter has continued to create art that challenges viewers to reexamine the way they define beauty and, by extension, depictions of pleasure.

In 2012 Playboy invited Minter to participate in an independently produced project that ultimately became a one-off supplement to this magazine, entitled *Playboy A–Z*. She began creating her *Bush* series, which provided the visuals used for the letter *B*. Over eight months, Playboy paid models to grow out their pubic hair, and Minter photographed each of them. In the images, we see subjects with manicured nails showcasing their luscious, bushy pubic areas. Well lathered and representing every color of the rainbow, each bush serves as a call to action for pop culture

"I want women to own their sexual agency." **Opposite, from top:** Orange Crush, 2009, enamel on metal; Green Pink Caviar, 2009, video still.







"One thing I was invested in was including pubic hair from women of all races and colors." **Clockwise from top:** Plush #9, #7 and #18; **opposite:** the original incarnation of Plush #2 (all archival ink-jet photos).

and art history to celebrate pubes. "There's nothing wrong with pubic hair, and it's been totally erased in art history. We all know Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde* and that's it," Minter says. One has to wonder: Why are there so few nonpornographic images of pubic hair — male, female or across the gender spectrum?

Two of the *Bush* photos were selected for the A–Z project — and both were reshot, in Minter's words, "behind wet glass to obscure them slightly." One of the images was flipped on the page, resulting in a perspective that doesn't reflect the model's point of view as Minter intended. The original version of that photo, as well as other *Bush* images unpublished in *Playboy A–Z*, are presented here.

In late 2014, Minter evolved the *Bush* series into a book called *Plush*. "I tried to make the images so beautiful that they could be in any house, gallery or museum," she says, "but as soon as people realize what they're looking at, they don't want them anymore. I don't care. I'm still making paintings and shooting different people."

I was curious why Minter wanted to share more *Bush/Plush* images in PLAYBOY now. "The new PLAYBOY has a fresh vision of female agency," she explains. "The women own their sexuality." Like a true Can cerian, Minter brings love to each project and faith to every opportunity. She's an artist who knows who she is and what she hopes to give. "My experience has been that if you feel absolutely terrified to do something, then it's probably legitimate."

Minter's life and work serve as reminders that there's always more good to be done. This fall, she'll continue to work with Swing Left, as well as Downtown for Democracy and Planned Parenthood, doing her part to fight against this administration. Almost every thread of our conversation eventually circles back to the struggle for freedom — even when we're talking about pleasure, which, as her artwork makes clear, often comes in unexpected forms.

"Pleasure is transitory," she says. "I have to find pleasure in being of service or doing activism or helping other individuals. That lasts longer than great sex, because even when I have all the things I thought would satisfy me, they never do." ■





just BRITT

Model **@JUSTBRIT01**

Photography by **LUIS GOMEZ @UNIVERSE137STUDIOS**













Describe your perfect day off when you are not modelling?
A perfect day off for me when not Modeling would be spending time with my family and hitting the gym hard

Do you feel more like a city person or a country person?
If I had to chose if I was a city or country gal that would be tough. I am from Chicago, but my soul is country

If you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be?
If I could chose one place to reside in the world that would be a toss up between Italy and Nashville!

Do you have a secret talent?
Do I have a secret talent? Well if I told ya it wouldn't be a secret! But my talents are drawing, painting, create dream catchers, work on my house (home repair) and some car repair!

Describe yourself in three words.
If I had to describe myself in three words I would go with; Determined, Loveable and Passionate

Were you excited to shoot for Playboy?
When I heard I was getting the chance to shoot for Playboy the word excited isn't strong enough! I'm beyond words!

What was it like starting out as a model?
When I first started to thinking about becoming a model, the hardest part was dealing with all the critics that said I couldn't make it

What would you consider to be your biggest challenge as a model so far?
I'd have to say my biggest challenge with modeling has been a few over the years. Most recently learning how to shoot on a road trip and later for Playboy magazine with a broken collarbone and being afraid I lost everything

A guilty pleasure?
Oh my! My guilty pleasure would have to be having sex in crazy fun/risky places!

Which song is absolutely certain to make you cry whenever you hear it?
The song that always makes me cry would have to be "I loved her first"

What is your favourite word in any language and what does it mean?
My fav word would have to be "Ti Amo" which is Italian for I love you. I'm a huge hopeless romantic so love means everything.

Any last words you would like to share with the readers?
If I could choose any last words for all of you, I must say dreams are possible. No matter what, you can accomplish anything you set your mind to.

FACE-TO-FACE WITH

TOROY MOI



PHOTOGRAPHY BY **MANCY GANT**

The multitalented musician rode the crest of chillwave, then dove head-first into exploring creativity and the joy of connection

BY **ANDREA DOMANICK**

"Wanna go up on the roof?" Chaz Bear asks me with a puckish grin.

His gusto catches me off guard. It has been a long day here at Company, the art studio and record label that Bear, otherwise known as experimental music act Toro y Moi, founded in Oakland, California. Last night he was here producing new music till five A.M., only to return hours later for a packed itinerary that includes being photographed, filmed and interviewed by PLAYBOY. As he heads into the last portion (it's now near sunset), Bear's energy hasn't wavered, and he's eager for me to see more of his world.

Reaching up, he pops a heavy circular access door installed above industrial pipes. A column of light pours in and bathes the rear of Company's second-floor recording studio. The opening, barely wider than his shoulders, resembles a submarine escape hatch. Passing through it requires some skilled scrambling between a ladder and a metal power box on the wall. Bear ascends, his legs dangling comically before he hoists himself up.

"You coming?" he asks, flashing that same grin. There's no knowing what lies above. But because Bear is a virtuoso — his creative exploits have positioned him as one of today's most daring and inspired cross-platform artists — chasing him into the sunset is a welcome pursuit.

• • •

A decade has passed since Bear, now 32, breached pop-cultural consciousness as Toro y Moi, a solo project birthed in a dorm room by a South Carolina raised skater misfit who loved J Dilla and Panda Bear. The hypnagogic pop sound and anxiously lackadaisical disposition of his 2010 debut LP, Causers of This, earned him a cult following and helped usher in a rapidly hyped musical movement called chillwave — a microgenre marked by nostalgia, escapism and glazed resignation. The embrace of chillwave and its theme of youthful abandonment was no doubt bolstered by 2008's fraught climate of recession and high unemployment.

But chillwave's star burned hot and fast, eventually cooling in the face of early-2010s hipster malaise. In retrospect, even if Toro y Moi is considered a progenitor of the genre, the association discounts the stylistically omnivorous explorations of his succeeding eight studio albums, two mixtapes and three EPs — releases fueled not by trends but by his love for exploration.

Today, Toro y Moi is just one facet of Chaz Bear, an artist whose imagination is central to his holistic identity and whose accomplishments read more like career-test results than a boilerplate biography. He's Chazwick Bradley Bear, né Bundick — singer, songwriter, producer, graphic designer, painter and album-cover artist; founder of Company Records; DJ and purveyor of dance music as Les Sins; collaborator with Travis Scott, Flying Lotus and Tyler, the Creator (among others); honoree of "Chaz Bundick Day" as bestowed by Berkeley's mayor; and workaholic by his own admission.

"I noticed that before my work got to where it is now, I was seeking pleasure in the creative process, in the genres I was seeking to re-create," Bear tells me. "The romance has shifted from the creative part to the enjoyment of people's expressions."

That shift is a hallmark of Toro y Moi's latest, this year's *Outer Peace*. The album not only marks Toro y Moi's sharpest stylistic turn yet — slinky R&B production, electronic dance beats and wide-eyed storytelling — it's also a thematic examination of Bear himself and his belief that one's artistic energy and potential are bound to the connections we share with the world around us.

• • •

Back on Company's rooftop: "Sometimes, on a clear day without all the fog, you can see the Golden Gate," Bear says, gesturing in the haze. Contrary to my expectations, the roof — an expanse of tar paper and stucco strewn with bottle caps — is unremarkable. What is remarkable is what surrounds it. The cascading hills of Berkeley and Kensington are to the northeast. A BART train careers by, the grid of residential Oakland beams in the low sun and peaks of construction protrude into the San Francisco skyline.

Surrounded by almost a dozen studios in this industrial arts complex, Company's patch of roof suggests humility. For Bear, it's an improvised island of escape from the mental and emotional grind below.

"This is just another normal day here at Company — this kind of thing, these people around," Bear says about the day's events. "It's fine; I love it. But if you're trying to wrap up a project, you can't really think here."

Only recently has Bear come to understand that embracing creative control also means knowing when to relinquish it. "Honestly, I didn't learn about taking care of myself until, like, three years ago. I didn't do things for my own emotional enjoyment until I was single again," he says, referring to his short-lived break from partner Samantha Beardsley. (The two are now married; they both took the "Bear" surname when they wed.) "You have to live through that. I was getting more and more depressed when I was making [2017's] Boo Boo. My brain wouldn't stop moving, and I couldn't get away from the computer. Like, Damn, I gotta design this, I gotta write this up, I gotta tech this thing. I was giving









myself all the work and never being like, Okay, maybe you should just sleep in today."

Living in Portland at the time of *Boo Boo*'s release, Bear skipped touring the new album — known to be the most lucrative part of a musician's career — to take up painting and hiking and to travel down to the Bay Area to embed himself in the art scene there. "I never gave myself a support system, and you need that for when you don't have your person," he says. "I had to force myself to stop being so introverted and just go make friends, because you're gonna drive yourself crazy."

When he moved back to Oakland in 2017, he formally opened Company Records. Ten years after Toro y Moi's inception, Bear is still DIY, but he's swapped his dorm room for a label and an incubator. Today, Company includes a print shop, a recording studio, a rehearsal space and a gallery, all of which are accessible to local artists. Providing such resources allows Bear to step out of the spotlight while retaining creative control, but it also means his lonewolf endeavors have to take a backseat.

Despite (or maybe because of) his penchant for putting in overtime, personal retreats have emerged as an essential part of his creative process. Last year he decamped to a writer's cabin outside San Francisco to complete *Outer Peace.* There, amid the solitude, wood paneling and a mounted cow's skull, he took stock of the work he'd produced while in existential free-fall.

"*Outer Peace* is successful because I got a chance to love every step of the process," he says. "Before, it was kind of a burden. Now I just got to play creative director."



Bear's voice takes on a quiet reverence as he reflects on the building's surrounding arts community, which inspired Company's communal approach to making art. "The whole reason I moved back from Portland was because I got grand fathered into this spot when my friend moved away," he says a little breathlessly. "It's all just iconic artists. Just amazing shit."

Behind us sits a row of studios, the windows of which offer glimpses into the practices of printers, metalworkers, sculptors and painters, many of whom, Bear says, have been tenants since the rent-controlled complex popped up in the 1970s. "These guys are like OG. That's why I feel so honored to have this space. They're of that era, the beatniks who moved here," he says. "That movement influenced this area to become a hub of open minds. You feel more at home here."

The older generations of artists who've endured also recharge Bear, even if he's aware that the playing field has changed. There has never been a more paradoxical time to be an artist: Hyperconnectivity is at war with cultural disconnection. More money is being exchanged by fewer hands. Corporate power precludes bottom-up innovation, forcing fringe industries to exist on their own terms and to rely on one another for community.

"You have to brand yourself. That's what it comes down to. It sucks, but it's no different than being the local real estate guy who's got his picture on every bench," Bear says. "If you're going to give yourself away, why not put it into your work?"

For his part, Bear has come a long way from the milieu that launched his career. No matter his and his veteran neighbors' aspirations, he recognizes they can control only what they produce. And they recognize that honing their skills, if focused enough, can only lead to beautiful results. "We just want to make things that help us connect," he says. "If that's the motive, what it's going to come down to is that face-to-face interaction is still going to hold value in the future."

Face-to-face connections are valuable because they can't be co opted, of course. Ultimately, they're reminders of the control we have over the world that surrounds us. It's not much, but maybe that's just fine.

"I see myself as a local shop owner. I don't aspire to take over the industry or anything. I just want to do good and serve who I can within my reach," he says. "And take it one step at a time. It has sort of been my approach this whole time. It's just building something in town."

As we lower ourselves back into the studio, Bear asks me if I'm hungry. "I'm kind of starving," he says.

We hastily gather our things to get to the restaurants before they close. Bear does a final sweep, locking doors, shutting cabinets, powering down equipment and switching off lights. The complex's heavy steel doors latch shut behind us with a decisive thud.

"Shit," Bear says, pivoting. He's forgotten his keys. His co-workers left hours ago, so we have to wait for a superintendent to let us in. I wander outside the complex's communal garden, where the branches of a small tree hang heavy with plums.

He plucks one and hands it to me. The flavor is floral and honey sweet, unusual and familiar. We stand there, feasting on plums and laughing at the absurdity. It's not what we'd planned, but it's satisfying just the same. ■

“I don’t aspire to take over the industry or anything. I just want to serve who I can within my reach.”







BEING SHOT

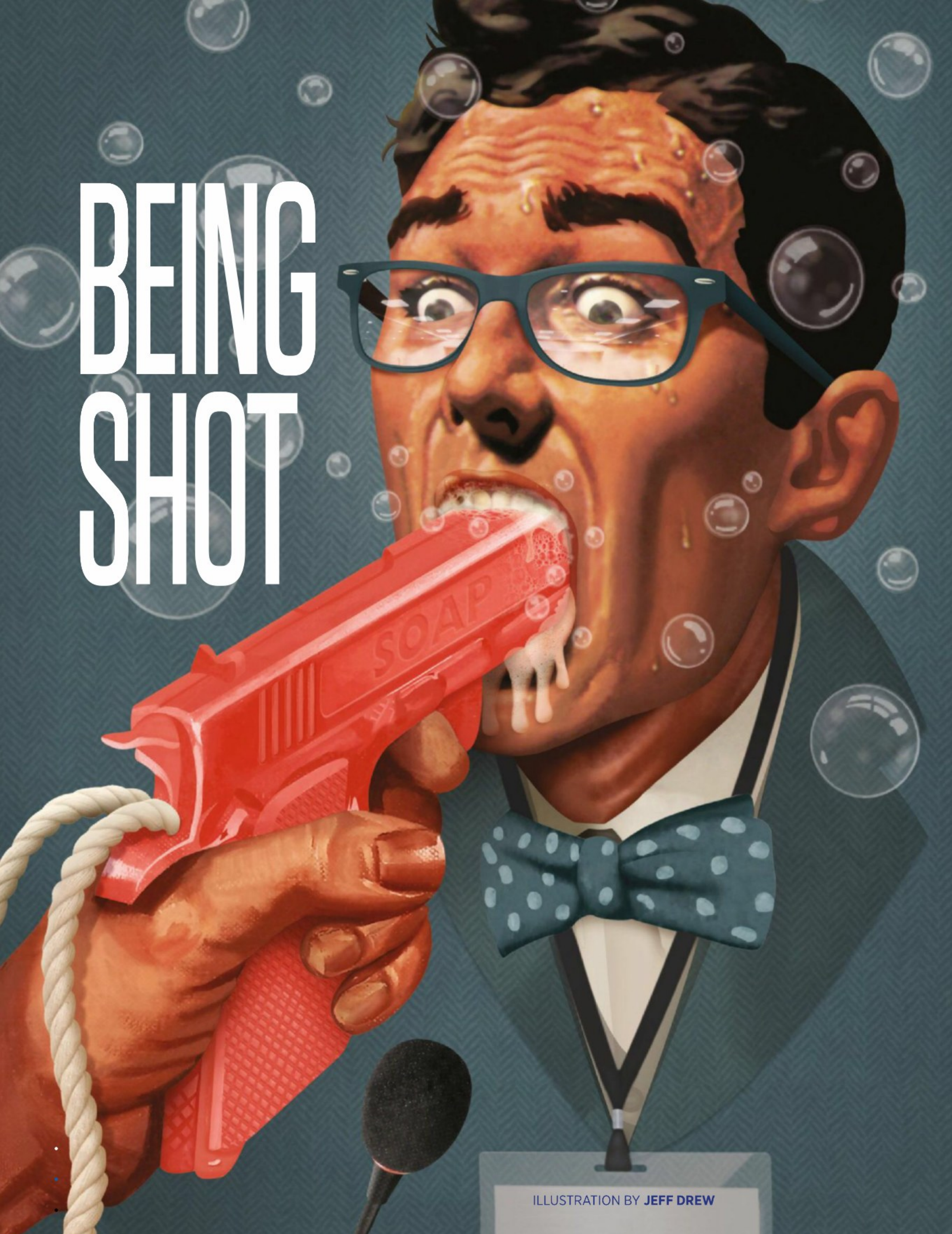


ILLUSTRATION BY **JEFF DREW**

WAS THE PROFESSOR DYING OR MERELY EXPERIENCING A NEW KIND OF AMERICAN DISCOURSE?

FICTION BY
CATHERINE LACEY

When I was shot, I was not surprised. I'd been waiting so long to be shot. Several childhood nights I dreamt of being assassinated by the entire cast of a popular sitcom, or spent afternoons wondering which neighborhood boy could soon shoot me, and I was regularly visited by visions of the mayor or a news anchor or a row of arm-linked Rockettes pursuing me with bullets, and several times I had nightmares that both my mother and my father, each of them, one after the other, shot me in the head. I have never touched a gun — I'm simply not that sort of person — so it has long been my American fate to meet the other end of a trigger. The right to bear arms carries the obligation to bear their burden.

Just before feeling no surprise in being shot, I was, however, briefly perplexed that this long-anticipated event had happened in a particularly dispiriting hotel conference room. The folding chairs and grim lighting simply set the wrong stage — it was somehow too ordinary of a location and yet not quite ordinary enough, not ordinary in the right way. The contrast of the image was set too low. The air felt pixelated. But then, holding my gut wound, I was overcome by how the blood pooling in my hands was as luxuriously temperate as the water of a perfectly calibrated bathroom faucet in a fine- dining establishment, and it was in that moment I fell to my knees, in awe or pain, as the room filled with screams and gun smoke and the smell of burnt flesh.

Hunched over the decorative carpet — a golden floral pattern interspersed with royal green fleurs-de-lis — I struggled to recall the history of the fleurs-de-lis, but all I could remember was the symbol meant one thing in one century, then meant its opposite in the next century, and now it carried both meanings or perhaps any meaning anyone wanted for it, or perhaps it had no meaning at all. True, European history was not exactly my field, but how horrible it was to see how poorly my own brain had held on to history. Hadn't open necks sent blood rolling between Parisian cobblestones? The least I could do — yes, the very least anyone could do — was to remember.

The chintzy chandelier above me was being dismantled by gunfire, and fake plastic crystal rained on my back as I tried to mentally reassemble key dates of the French Revolution. Yet who can be counted upon to recall anything specific when bathing one's hands in such luxuriously temperate fluid, the likes of which you'll find only in the very best fine-dining establishments? We had assembled in that hotel conference room for the annual Conference on the State of Modern Thought, a four-day invitationonly symposium organized and attended by a cadre of multidisciplinary academics, and each night we dined at the finest restaurants in that year's host city, and at the end of each decadent meal we put down our endowment-backed credit cards with a wanton satisfaction we each tried to wear casually.

More specifically, we had assembled in that hotel conference room for a muchanticipated session led by Harold Mennakin, an extremely charismatic but not entirely substantive philosopher of philosophy who was giving a lecture about how every theoretically monumental philosophical idea descended, paradoxically, from the minuscule subjective reality of one person's meaningless life. The title of the talk was "No Great Man," and I had gathered from the pamphlet's description and from a cursory understanding of Mennakin's work that he was making an ethical argument for a philosophical methodology that is self-negating and pluralistic, which interested me in theory but less, I realized, in actuality. Mennakin was in the midst of a clumsy metaphor about intellectual solipsism that involved a pressure cooker and dried beans when our assailant threw open the double doors, hoisted his guns without grace and began shooting.

To be honest, Mennakin had lost me with the bean metaphor — I hear he's a staunch vegan and perhaps his ethical diet has come at the expense of his sense of aesthetics and though I do agree with him that it's a tragedy we so often fail to see around the corner of ourselves, I was much relieved by the sudden interruption, a relief that lasted at least until I fell to the floor, where my wound issued its seductive warmth into my hands.

Moments later, the shooter paused to deliver some remarks at the vacated podium. The shooter believed us all to be perverts and delinquents who had scammed our way into positions of

THE WORD *PROBLEMATIC* HAD BEEN DEPLOYED AS IF IT WERE A POCKETKNIFE FIT FOR ANY USE.

academic authority, and he accused us of trying to convert the American collegiate masses to our dark and tweedy ways. "All of you should be institutionalized, removed from the mating pool, or worse," he told us, and though I did not agree with him, I had to admit that his delivery was surprisingly compelling. The shooter called us atheists, snobs, intellectuals — to which none of us would levy any objections — "and one of you," he said, "wrote a disgusting story about a dog trying to have sex with a human elbow." And it was appalling and it had to stop and someone had to be the one to stop it. "What the fuck is wrong with you people? Who needs this stuff? Why do you want anyone to think about these things?" Then he resumed fire.

We were all professors, of course, but we were also philosophers and theorists and essayists and economists, of a sort, and though none of us would openly call ourselves artists, a scarce few of us painted or made films and there were a handful who had once or still did publish poetry or fiction in journals that ranged from vaguely available to wholeheartedly obscure. In fact, I had been the one, several months prior to the conference, who had published a poem that included the image of a dog trying to insert his penis into a slit between the speaker's forearm and biceps, a moment that causes the speaker, a man, to empathize with all of womankind. The poem had, to that minor literary journal's surprise, become the focal point of three days' worth of internet debate, and in the many critical takedowns and defenses of the poem, the word *problematic* had been deployed as if it were a pocketknife fit for any use. As a result, I'd been invited to this year's Conference on the State of Modern Thought to give a lecture on the *problematic* nature of the contemporary use of the word problematic.

Lisa Kindalee, however, one of the staunchest critics of that poem's very existence (not to mention its publication), had also been invited to this year's conference to give a competing lecture on the revolutionary nature of the use of the word *problematic* over the past decade of public discourse. To make matters worse, our lectures had been scheduled to happen concurrently, forcing any potential attendee to choose a side before even hearing the arguments in a debate that was not necessarily as diametrically opposed as the session titles made it seem.

I've always been uncomfortable with conflict and competition of any sort, a skittish disposition that was partly what led me into academia in the first place. I've always had an aversion to games and sports, despite possessing a somewhat hefty physique. At a young age I longed to be a history professor, because history made me cry in a way that felt historical, as if I were crying tears that belonged to the dead, as if that sorrow won me an esteemed place in the world, and even as a child I disliked that platitude about history repeating itself, not because it wasn't true — it was and still is, in a way — but because that phrase had been repeated so often that it had become itself, and by becoming itself it had become invisible, a repetition of a copy of a thought, a vacant cheer from the sidelines of a history one is excused from ever knowing because one is actively living through its equally unimportant sequel, as if all years merely slipped from a machine that made years.

But there I was on the floor of a hotel conference room, a Xerox of an American history, bleeding into the fleurs-de-lis. Another plastic jewel fell from the battered chandelier and landed on my shoulder as gently as a tapping finger — excuse me, sir.

The shooter, I'm told, made no rush on his way through the lobby and was tackled, without resisting, by a frenzied security guard, and only then was it revealed that all his guns had been made of 3-D-printed plastic and all the bullets were a sort of rubber semi-explosive filled with an indeterminate molten substance. All our wounds were superficial and every last one of us survived, which means this story can be read without sacrificing a moment of anyone's sincere pleasure in the languid unwinding of late capitalism.

Still — we were all sent to the hospital as a precaution. There was a concern that we may have been exposed to a chemical weapon

or merely traumatized or perhaps our superficial wounds were more complex than they first seemed, prone to infection, prone to litigation. As I raised myself from the hotel carpet I realized the pleasant warmth I'd felt in my hands had not been my own beautiful blood but some strange syrupy substance, faintly neon red, perfumed with gunpowder and death. How, I wondered, had this substance been able to maintain such a consistently pleasing temperature, that expertly calibrated blend of hot and cold?

Prior to the shooting, everyone had spent their free time between lectures trying to curry each other's favor for hypothetical favors that might later be needed or given, and a minority among the group took this exercise into the realm of extramarital affairs — though most of those affairs seem to have been experienced only in the abstract and only a very small number were ever concretized — but for the most part the conference is just a way for a group of people to use their obscure interests as a path toward people who might pay them some attention. That's all it ever really is.

After the shooting, however, the entire conference was moved, first unofficially, then officially, to the hospital. A psychologistphilosopher began giving a speech in the waiting room about how the shooting had pulled back a curtain on each of our truest identities; seen that way, it was a kind of gift. When the shots began, some of us had panicked and fled the room, stepping over bodies and pushing past each other, while others had remained supine in our chairs, our latent suicidal tendencies laid bare. Some had thrown themselves over the bodies of those with whom they'd been engaged or merely trying to begin affairs, preferring to usher our spouses into widowhood rather than become a person who has seen their lover, whether imagined or actual, die.

I was assigned a hospital room with many other semi-injured. A nursing student punctured me with an injection needle in several places on both my arms before she finally administered some kind of medication that made me weep and tremble. "Don't worry," she kept saying, as other nurses and academics paced in and out of this room's many doors. "Don't worry." A woman walked the length of the room, from one door to another, with her cell phone ringing some melodic tune several times before the nursing student finally finished her task, my arms a smear of rubbing alcohol and blood and half-stuck bandages.

By then the hospital room had filled with conference-goers and someone had installed himself atop a chair in the corner of the room and begun an impromptu lecture on how no belief is meaningful until it is translated into action. I recognized this as a repurposed version of a talk he was already scheduled to give, about how the two primary problems of the internet were that it created the illusion that digital speech was equivalent to action and that it upheld the illusion that any statement can ever be completely sincere or altruistic — proclamations never occur in a vacuum. The updated form of this lecture posited that, at the very least, the shooter's sincere objection to our works and worldviews — despite being unfounded and logically inconsistent — had led him to action, and when the shooter enacted his beliefs by "shooting" us, he had revealed a dark truth about our beloved Conference on the State of Modern Thought, which is that most of those who participate in it have blindly accepted this lie of the paralysis of the Individual in the Information Age.

As I listened to this lecture I had to turn sideways and fetal on the hospital cot, as it was simply not large enough for me as I am a very large man. I clutched my bruised belly and cried my historical tears, trembling as I was held hostage to whatever drug was flowing in my bloodstream, calling all the shots within my body. It was then the president of the Conference on the State of Modern Thought knelt beside me to say that my lecture had to be canceled as it had been rendered obsolete by recent events, but when I asked him if Lisa Kindalee's lecture had also been canceled, he just said the story was still unfolding, that new lines of thinking were already being drawn, that I would soon have the opportunity to reapply for next year's conference and he would personally ensure that my application was given full consideration by the committee, and with that the president was gone.

Then a young woman I'd never seen before sat beside me and she looked down at me with a gaze somewhere between somber and sexual. "Are you the one who wrote the poem about the dog trying to fuck the crook of someone's elbow?" I nodded. "I scanned it," she said, and — foolish me — I thought that meant she wanted to discuss my complicated system of mirrored trochees and iambs, a poetic feat that no one ever mentioned in the poem's ensuing controversy, but she hadn't meant that at all. She inserted three fingers into the crook of my elbow, right at the spot where the injection had finally taken, and I wanted to tell her that even though the poem contained the image of a dog trying to fuck the crook of someone's elbow, that didn't mean the poem was about a dog trying to fuck the crook of someone's elbow. That was the thing about art, wasn't it? That the apparent subject concealed the true object? I wasn't sure of anything anymore, I thought, or maybe that's just what the medication wanted me to think. Was I speaking? Was the room spinning? How much of the thing I called my life had been imaginary? The girl skipped away from the cot's edge, and I recalled, for some unknown reason, how utterly modern it was that the neighborhood boys of my childhood were so intent on playing a game called War all summer, though none of them, to my knowledge, ever joined an actual army.

Then, moved by a mysterious neurochemical or moved by some holy spirit of the academic, I stood on my cot and launched into a sermon about a revelation I'd just had: Poetry — sweet Jesus, poetry! — was still alive in America! Had the shooter not been stirred by a poetic creation of carefully calibrated trochees and iambs into action? Had the shooter not been changed by a mere and mighty poem and translated this personal transformation into a physical gesture, a performance, an elaborate gesture meant to elaborate on his thoughts on that poem? It was true (wasn't it true?) that poetry still held real power! Yes, no matter how battered and ignored poetry had become in this era, it still held the power to change the course of history!

I'd become so dizzy over poetry and history that I had to slide back down into a fetal position on the cot, and in my half-sleep I thought I heard someone saying that the shooting had in fact been a work of performance art, and someone else said that the shooter was no less of a monster for being an artist, and someone else argued that true art should have the freedom to do harm, and someone else suggested a New American restaurant with an extensive cocktail list, and someone else argued that just because you call yourself an artist doesn't mean you aren't also a sociopath.

But who are we to diagnose anyone? That's not our field, not really. In our hearts, I think, we just want to be good people who are kind to other good people. We get flu shots for the sake of public health. We read the manuals on workplace harassments and racisms and sexisms very carefully, with somber, serious gazes. And before we leave any washroom, we wash our hands for a full 20 seconds with plenty of soap and attention to the nail beds and cuticles, and we relish the way the water feels as thick and warm as the blood of any human, of any living human at all. ■



Kim

KEROTIKA

Model **@KIMBERLYKMODEL**

Photography by **FREDDY KOH**
MUA **ANASTACIO**
Styling Assistant **PICHU**







Were you excited to shoot for Playboy?
Absolutely! Playboy gives me the opportunity to express my sexuality, my creativity and my boldness. The day we did this shoot, there was a palpable magic in the air.

Name three things on your bucket list?
Jump into a frozen lake. Walk over hot coals. Visit all the countries before I die.

What would you consider to be your biggest challenge as a model so far?
Censorship.

Do you have a guilty pleasure?
I have many pleasures, though none that I feel guilty about.

What is your favourite word in any language and what does it mean?
I really love onomatopoeic words that sound the way they are... like moist... and slice.

What would you say is your best feature?
My eyes. I love to cast eye spells.

What do you enjoy most about what you do?
I love feeling like a Goddess when I'm shooting. Also, when I perform at events like Snctm and Kinky Rabbit Club — I feel so sexy and divine in the beautiful costumes and the alluring atmosphere.

What makes you feel sexy?
Seduction through the senses.

What advice would you give to women aspiring to get into modelling?
Don't do it for likes. Do what makes you feel the most alive.

What is one thing people may be surprised to find out about you?
Just how far my adventures go.

What is your mantra?
I recently heard my friend Zooey share her mantra with me, and I've adopted it for myself...
I am a very powerful witch.







NEW YORK



NEW YORK

New York City is recognized the world-over and it's a truly splendid place to visit with its contemporary living standards and its broad and ever-increasing cultural diversity of residents. What's not to love? NYC packs more to see and do into one compact area than any other place on earth. Here, you'll get to experience the best of both worlds, man and nature, with some naturally beautiful scenery like those found at Central Park or the breathtaking views over the city from one of the numerous skyscrapers - all combined with the modern bustle and experiences of modern city living. Technically, the New York City region is comprised of five boroughs all conveniently placed where the Hudson River meets the Atlantic Ocean. Each borough is unique and diverse with its own roster of must-see destinations, adventures, landmarks, great restaurants, cultural hot spots and unforgettable day and night activities.

DID YOU KNOW?

THE CITY GOT ITS FAMOUS NICKNAME HORSE RACING

THE COMMON TERM “BIG APPLE” WAS USED TO DESCRIBE A BIG MONEY PRIZE AT IMPAORTANT HORSE RACES HELD AROUND THE CITY.

DID YOU KNOW?

THE FIRST TAXIS WERE ORIGINAL RED AND GREEN

THESE WERE THE COLORS OF THE OFFICIAL TAXI OPERATOR IN THE EARLY 1900S. THE COMMON COLOR YELLOW WAS ONLY ADOPTED IN 1912.

The epicenter of this great city has to be the Manhattan area, not just because it's very central but because it captures the look and feel of New York City, almost like it's the heart of NYC. Manhattan is a densely populated city-slash-residential area that's a buzzing nod of activity and as such Manhattan is highly regarded as an extraordinary place that's well-known for its world-class facilities which are considered in high-esteem amongst the world's major commercial, financial and cultural centers. A few of Manhattan's iconic landmarks include majestic skyscrapers such as the Empire State Building and the easy-but-busy sprawling Central Park. Other notable places include the Broadway theater which is conveniently located amongst the neon lights of Times Square which is also a great place to visit your local pub for a drink or catch a tasty slice of pizza! The Brooklyn Bridge connects Manhattan to the borough of Brooklyn, where there's a variety of neighborhoods that span across cultures and economic profiles from Williamsburg – a hotbed of indie music, art and nightlife – to beachfront Coney Island and its amusement parks. In New York City there's truly something for everyone to enjoy.

Other locations to visit on your next trip through New York City should include Queens which is home to Flushing Meadows Corona Park, with its 12-story 1964 World's Fair globe sculpture, the Unisphere. Then there's the Bronx, NYC's northernmost borough which is most notably known as the home of underground hip-hop but that's not all, it's also home to the landmark New York Botanical Garden and the internationally renowned Bronx Zoo. The Staten Island Ferry links Manhattan to NYC's southernmost borough with stunning views of the city skyline and the Statue of Liberty. Although the inner-city doesn't seem like the first one of the places that springs to mind when you're picturing an ideal vacation, New York City actually has a lot to offer the exploring heart. There are great and plentiful things to do, from visiting museums and the Statue of Liberty to checking out some of their magnificent viewers from the Empire State building - or simply just catching a ride along the Brooklyn Bridge. A trip to New York City is the experience of a lifetime with famous attractions like Times Square, Central Park, the Empire State Building and Yankee Stadium — to name just a few.





THE 9/11 MEMORIAL AND MUSEUM

It's not just a museum but a piece of history that endeavors to commemorate the September 11, 2001 attacks, which killed 2,977 people, and the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. Here visitors will get to witness some life-changing events and hear testimonies as you reflect on what it meant, and how it changed the fight for freedom and liberty. If history and discovering modern heritage is your thing then this is a definite must-do. Be sure to buy yourself a souvenir so you can take home a few memories of your own.

Visit 911memorial.org for more information.

NEW YORK CITY HELICOPTER TOURS

Why not see it from above, all at once? Now you can experience the best views of New York City from inside the warmth and safety of a helicopter complete with large floor-to-ceiling convex windows. The great thing about flying is you'll have the chance to take it all in with stunningly beautiful views over Central Park, the Hudson River, and New York Harbor, including the Intrepid Sea Air Space Museum. But that's not all, you'll also get to cruise past the Rockefeller Center, Empire State Building, the World Financial Center, and the Chrysler Building, as well as the iconic Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, Greenwich Village, South Street Seaport, and the 126-year-old Brooklyn Bridge. Talk about an action-packed tour that'll have you interested every single moment from lift-off to landing. Tours include expert narration so you'll learn a few new things and you'll be able to ask your guide questions along the way. So, what's stopping you? Nothing!

Visit getyourguide.com for more information.



HARBOR LIGHTS NIGHT CRUISE

New York City is an awesome place to experience things at any time of the day, so why not experience some of New York at sunset on a 2-hour cruise of the harbor. Here, you'll get to take in all the sights and lights of Manhattan aboard a climate-controlled boat built for comfort and sophistication. This is definitely an experience to share with others so take your friends, family, and colleagues and embark on a truly memorable adventure of the harbor with "Lady Liberty" keeping a close watch! With a drink in your hand, purchased from the fully stocked bar, feel the breeze on your face and be mesmerized by the shimmering skyline. Get endless photo opportunities to make you an Instagram star as you sail past legendary attractions such as the Statue of Liberty getting you perfect views of the Freedom Tower - One World Trade Center, Empire State Building, Pier 54 (Titanic Pier), Battery Park and more. See where millions of immigrants were processed when they arrived in America at Ellis Island, cruise past Governors Island, the South Street Seaport and Brooklyn Bridge. Get unrivaled views of the Manhattan Bridge, Williamsburg Bridge, and the Chrysler Building, and discover the East Village, United Nations Building and USS Intrepid Pier from a different perspective. Download the Skyline Navigator App to your personal device before you set sail to enhance your cruise experience with audio and written commentary in English, Chinese, French, Spanish, German, Italian and Portuguese. Talk about the perfect tour!

Visit gocity.com for more information.



DID YOU KNOW?

THE HISTORY OF THE STATUE OF LIBERTY

THE ICONIC STATUE ORIGINALLY ARRIVED IN 350 PIECES ALL PACKED IN 214 CRATES. INTERESTINGLY, THE ARM HOLDING THE FLAME ARRIVED A DECADE EARLY AND WAS PUT ON DISPLAY TO HELP RAISE FUNDS FOR THE PROJECT.



EMPIRE STATE BUILDING

There are more awesome New York City tours on offer and another eye-catcher from getyourguide.com is the Empire Stae Building. Depending on the option selected, you can skip the ticket line with a General Ticket or skip all the lines with the Express Ticket - available online. The Express Ticket also includes a flexible date feature allowing you to visit whenever within 1 month of your scheduled ticket date. You can plan your visit around the weather when you are in New York. Your entrance also includes a unique downloadable multimedia experience that is available in nine languages. The app also includes videos, image galleries, quizzes, and maps showing nearby points of interest. The New Empire State Building Experience not only gives you access to the legendary New York City landmark, allowing you to soar 1,054 foot (320 meters) high and enjoy magnificent 360-degree open-air views of New York City and beyond. If there ever was a top three places to see in New York City, the Empire State Building would definitely be one of them.

Visit getyourguide.com for more information.

DID YOU KNOW?

THE OLDEST BUILDING WAS BUILT IN 1642

IT WAS CALLED THE WYCKOFF FARM, A BROOKLYN HOUSE THAT WAS ORIGINALLY BUILT IN THE 1640S BY A FORMER INDENTURED SERVANT.

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART EVENING TOUR

Take a moment from the busy streets to explore the galleries of one of the world's most visited art institutions. Here you'll get the chance to see some of the most influential pieces of art that'll open your mind to modern and evolving forms of modern culture all while you enjoy the company of your fellow art aficionados. The museum offers visitors the opportunity to discover a wide selected of works in their collection while accompanied by an expert in art history. With their specialized knowledge and a truly personally-tailored approach, they'll be able to answer any questions you may have all while creating a unique and memorable experience you're sure to enjoy. All tours begin with a magnificent sunset viewing of the Temple of Dendur, whereafter visitors get to explore the majestic temple as if you were on the shore of the Nile at dusk. But that's not all, shortly after you'll get to work your way through the American Wing, where the building's original copper lights illuminate the wing's emblematic golden Diana sculpture. It's truly a one-of-a-kind experience and no matter what your interest or level of expertise is, you're guaranteed to leave the museum with a deeper understanding and an increased affection towards the collections.

Visit moma.org for more information.



DID YOU KNOW?
THERE ARE OVER 800 LANGUAGES SPOKEN IN NEW YORK CITY

THIS IS MAINLY DUE TO THE CITY'S DIVERSE CULTURE AND ITS INHABITANTS WHICH HAIL FROM ALL AROUND THE WORLD.

BROOKLYN BRIDGE & DUMBO

Another awesome tour to consider is the Brooklyn Bridge & DUMBO tour where you'll meet outside the Tweed Court House to begin an informative 2-hour walking tour. Beginning with the establishment of Brooklyn, once an independent city, then moving on to discuss the borough's diversity and its position as the most populous section of New York City today. Here you'll also have a view of some of the most prominent landmarks of Lower Manhattan. Approaching the Brooklyn Bridge you'll learn about the roots of ferry travel across the East River, the politics behind the building of the bridge, and the trials and tribulations of the Roebling family – the designers of the famed bridge – and their contributions to the life, history, and heritage of the city. Listen to riveting facts and stories about the construction of the bridge, its immigrant builders, and how it encouraged commerce between Brooklyn and Manhattan. Along with getting background on other bridges, buildings, and monuments, while crossing the East River you'll have several photo opportunities as you traverse the Brooklyn Bridge and descend into the trendy Dumbo (Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass) neighborhood. All this sounds like the perfect opportunity to take some unique family pictures - and selfies. While in Dumbo, stroll the cobblestone streets still crisscrossed with old Brooklyn trolley-tracks and lined with historic architecture. Once crumbling warehouses now contain upmarket condominiums, restaurants, shops, boutiques, and galleries. As the tour comes to a close in Brooklyn Bridge Park, you can take in scenic waterfront views of the Manhattan skyline and the Brooklyn Bridge.

Visit getyourguide.com for more information.



NEW YORK CITY GRAFFITI & STREET ART

Thanks to modern-day technology and social media there is more awareness than ever before about the imaginative artists who bring walls, buildings, and even entire neighborhoods to life with their vibrant creations. Join this extraordinary 2-hour walking tour in Bushwick, Brooklyn to see fascinating works by globetrotting innovators and creatives. You'll be shown a large variety of artistic murals both large and small as you explore the lively streets all pulsating with a tangible sense of creative energy, in a district rapidly becoming a world-renowned center of street art, as well as New York City's graffiti cultural locus. During your walk you'll be fully immersed in the culture and lifestyle of today's contemporary urban artists, who hail from as far away as Europe, South America, and even Asia. Learn about the top contemporary artists and their quirky personalities, and find out just how much people have been willing to pay for their work. Discover the different styles and forms of the trade, which includes various art forms such as murals, wheatpaste posters, tags, and stencils. Learn about the techniques employed and how they have developed and evolved over the years into a reputable form of creativity and personal expression. This is the perfect tour if you want to learn more about this exploding phenomenon, or if you simply would like to see for yourself the very best street art New York City has to offer.

Visit newyorkpass.com for more information.



LAYLA ADAMS

Model **@LAYLAADAMS_MODEL**

Photography by **BRUCE COLERO @BRUCECOLERO**
MUA **KYLE MCKELLAR**
Shoot Assistant **DANIELLE HAWKINS**





Describe yourself in three words.
Sweet, athletic and a little goofy.

Were you excited to shoot for Playboy?
Yes! So excited! Something I always dreamt about but I was really nervous to try. A dream come true for sure!

What was it like starting out as a model?
It was a lot of fun but a little difficult to figure out who to trust.

What would you consider to be your biggest challenge as a model so far?
Figuring out who has your best interest in mind and staying away from all the tempting junk food.

Describe your perfect day off when you are not modelling?
I love anything outside. I'd love to go to the beach or a nice hike, a little shopping then dinner and drinks on a rooftop patio watching the sunset.

Do you feel more like a city person or a country person? City.
I love the energy in the city but with a private space I can escape to.

If you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be?
California

Do you have a secret talent?
I can make the best turkey dinner. From homemade pierogies to turkey with gravy. I have perfected how to get a juicy, melt in your mouth turkey.

A guilty pleasure?
I love a massage with warm oil.

Which song is absolutely certain to make you cry whenever you hear it?
Lay me Down by Sam Smith

What is your favourite word in any language and what does it mean?
L'amour. It means love in French.

Any last words you would like to share with the readers?
Thank you so much for your support! I'm truly grateful. If we ever meet, I have a huge hug waiting for you.

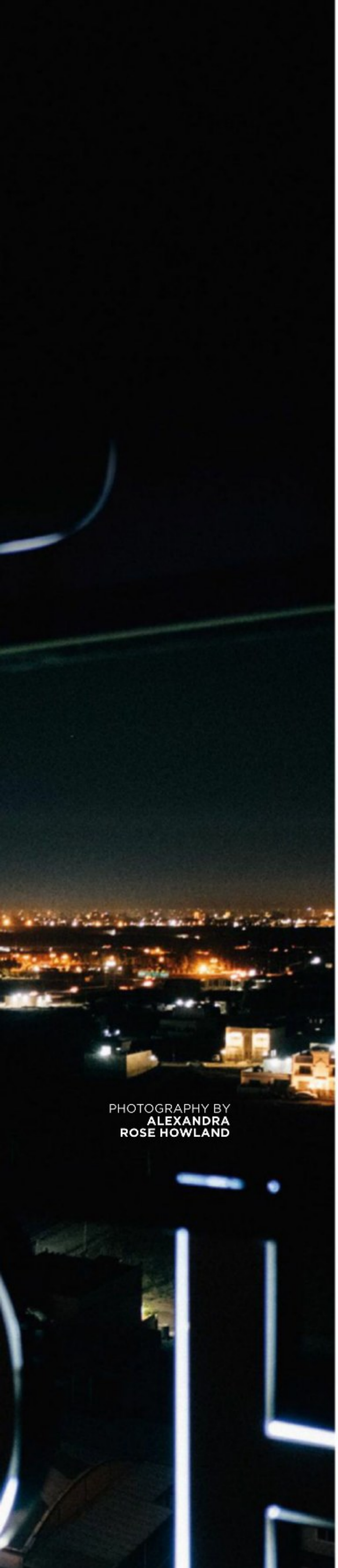








NIGHTS IN ERBIL



PHOTOGRAPHY BY
ALEXANDRA ROSE HOWLAND

IN THE HEART OF A REGION THAT FACES AGGRESSION FROM ALL SIDES, THE PURSUIT OF PLEASURE CAN BE DEATH DEFYING. HERE'S HOW A HANDFUL OF LOCALS DO IT FROM ROOFTOP BARS TO THE UNDERGROUND DRAG SCENE

BY **KEVIN KNODELL**

In Erbil, the capital of Iraq's semiautonomous Kurdish region, even locals admit that the summer heat is a kind you never really get used to. People go out only if they have to for work, sweating as the sun beats down through a pale blue sky. On the hottest days the breeze feels like a hair dryer blowing in your face.

But as the sun begins to set, the city comes to life. Families and children make their way out into the streets and the parks. Old men break out cards and dice, tea sets and shisha (water pipes better known to Westerners as hookahs). Kebab and fruit stands appear on the sidewalks and in the streets.

As the darkness spreads, young people congregate. From street corners you can catch glimpses of young women applying their makeup. Soon enough, the streets get louder and more kinetic. Despite being situated in a deeply conservative — and sometimes volatile — region, this city of roughly 880,000 is known for its bars and nightclubs.

At White Erbil, a rooftop bar above a hotel overlooking the city, a DJ cranks M.O.P.'s "Ante Up" as patrons lounge around a pool. To enter, you first have to get past an armed security detail of men in black military-style uniforms adorned with Kurdish flags. On the roof, local club goers and Western aid workers down beers and cocktails as the pool glows and soft lights illuminate the space.

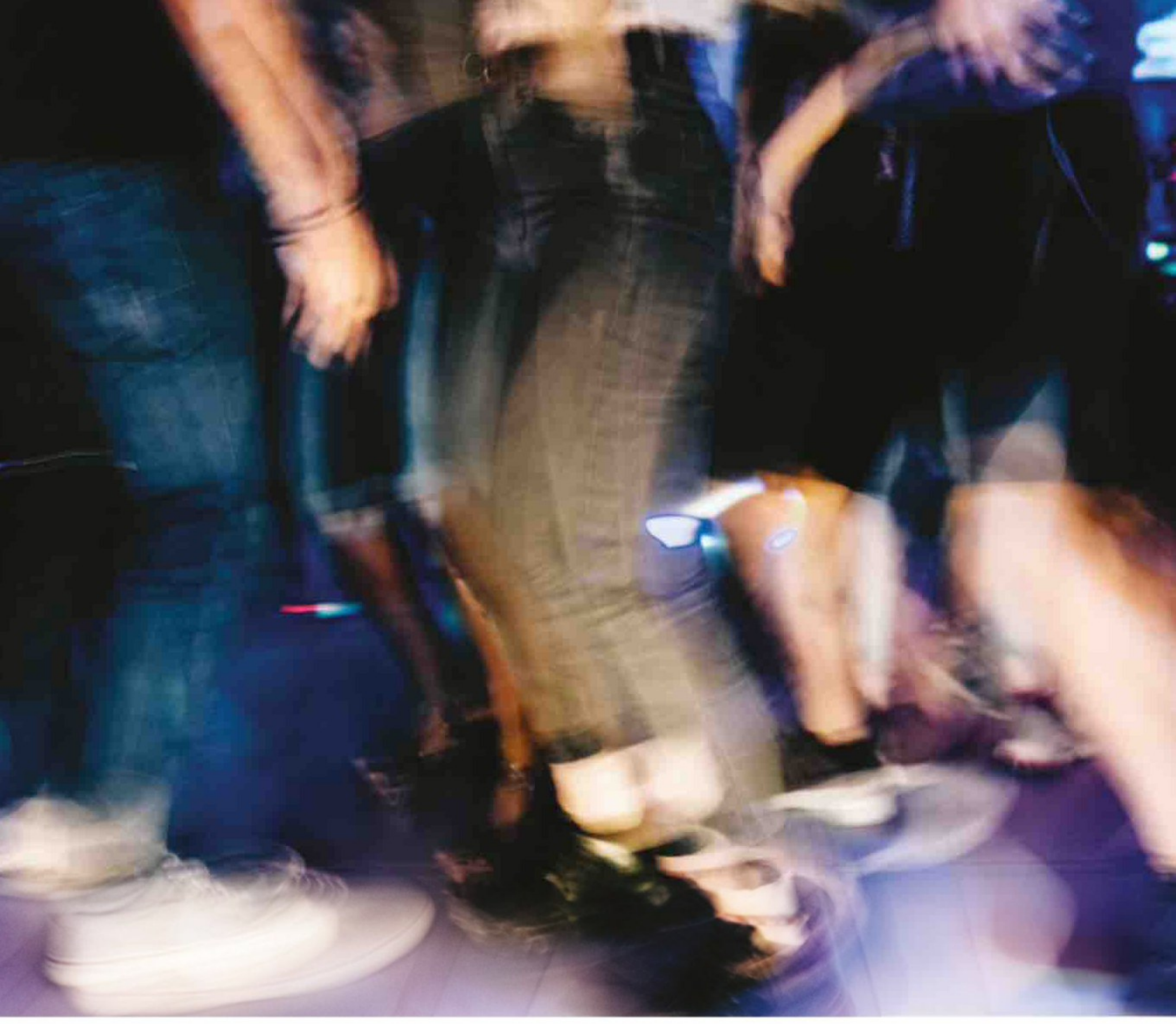
One of the Westerners is an Iraqi American woman who grew up in northern California after Saddam Hussein's regime cracked down on southern Shia communities and turned her family into refugees. She returned to Iraq a year ago to work with Iraqis and Syrians displaced by the most recent waves of conflict. Dressed in a traditional Arab dress and drinking a gin and tonic, she's debating whether a speakeasy could be successful in Erbil. Kurds and Arabs wouldn't embrace a small, quiet nightlife space, she says, though she concedes that marketing it as an exclusive venue might draw interest. "Iraqis do love the VIP thing," she says.

Then the lights go out and the music stops. Erbil's power grid is a ramshackle patchwork of generators that frequently fail, especially during the summer. But after a quick laugh, patrons go on chatting and drinking as though nothing has happened.

"Welcome to Kurdistan," a fellow patron says with a chuckle.

• • •

Iraqi Kurdistan is surrounded by countries and groups that oppose its autonomy and occasionally bomb its population. Its people have survived displacement and genocide. That gives every



moment special meaning as they pursue life's pleasures — both the simple and the forbidden.

When Western powers carved up borders in the modern Middle East after World War I, the Kurds were not a priority. Today as many as 45 million Kurdish people are spread across Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Iran and the sizable diaspora that exists in the West. They're widely considered the world's largest cultural and linguistic group without a country of its own.

A mountain people, the Kurds are mostly Sunni Muslims. With borders dividing them and few friends, they've faced repression from regional governments for generations. Their homeland's topography has given them refuge from the armies that at various times have tried to kill or subjugate them — hence the Kurdish saying "No friends but the mountains."

From the south, Saddam Hussein subjected the Kurds to genocidal campaigns that included what has been described as history's largest chemical- weapons attack against a civilian population. Iraq's Kurds have also fought among themselves: The brutal Kurdish civil war of the 1990s pitted the Kurdistan Democratic Party against the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the two dominant parties in the Kurdish government today. But the establishment of an American-led-military-enforced safe zone, increasing foreign investment and a booming oil industry all came together to allow Iraqi Kurdish cities to grow and prosper, resulting in a stability that has eluded other areas in the region.

This haven for its namesake population is surprisingly diverse: Kurds make up a firm majority in Kurdistan, but it's also home to long-established communities of Arabs, Chaldean and Assyrian Christians, Turkmens and Yazidis — and more recently a hodgepodge of immigrant workers and expats.

Of the Kurdish cities that have flourished since the first Gulf War, perhaps none has grown as much as Erbil. It comprises



several neighborhoods that serve as rough nerve centers for various groups — notably the Christian enclave of Ankawa — but the borders are fuzzy, and communities tend to intermingle and spread out. Iranians regularly cross the border for work and leisure, taking advantage of laws that allow them to drink and dress much less conservatively than at home.

In coffee shops and cafés, people sip tea and smoke *shisha*. Live music colors the evening air, a mix of traditional fare and more Westernized offerings that regularly overlap in beguiling ways. There are salsa nights, a jazz club, burgeoning rooftop bars and lots of outdoor patios designed for the hot summer nights. There are also fancy restaurants that cater to wining and-dining businessmen, diplomats and Western aid workers charging the bills to their organizations' expense accounts.

"It can get crazy," says Viyan, a young Kurdish woman with long curly hair and pale green eyes. She's wearing a lowcut floral sundress and sipping a Mexican beer at Dusk, a crowded rooftop bar aglow with moody orange lighting. Local art decorates the walls, along with more international influences and pop art. At one table a woman in a pink hijab — the only person in the room wearing one — sits smoking *shisha* at a table shared by much less modestly dressed patrons drinking booze.

Erbil's bar scene is diverse, but the number of alcohol-serving establishments is limited. That means each venue can draw large crowds. Drinks can be expensive and lines can be long. Viyan explains that young locals often drink before heading out to a bar — or even on the way. "Sometimes we mix cocktails in the back of the car while we're driving to the bar," she says.

The Middle East is both less and more puritanical than many Westerners understand. The cultural and historical dynamics are rife with nuance: When the United States government officially put alcohol prohibition into effect in the 1920s, some Iraqi newspapers ran editorials expressing bafflement and condemnation of Americans' embrace of a policy that denied their fellow countrymen the long-accepted delights of spirits.

Although conservative movements have since become much more entrenched and powerful in the country, when the Iraqi parliament attempted to pass an alcohol ban in 2016, Iraqis forcefully opposed it. "If they had banned alcohol, everyone would have started doing drugs," one Iraqi Christian woman living in Erbil says — though she concedes that there's already a fair amount of drug use in Kurdistan. She says party drugs like ecstasy and cocaine aren't hard to get, but hashish is by far the most popular, even if no one admits it: "Everyone I know smokes hashish."

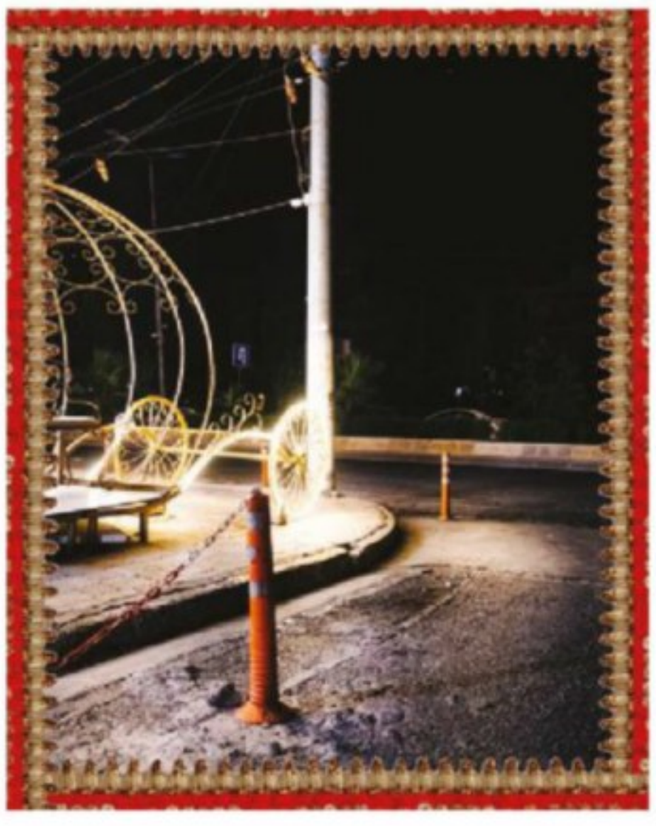
"You have a mix of mercenaries and people who have survived the most extraordinary hardships. They've found a common culture here."

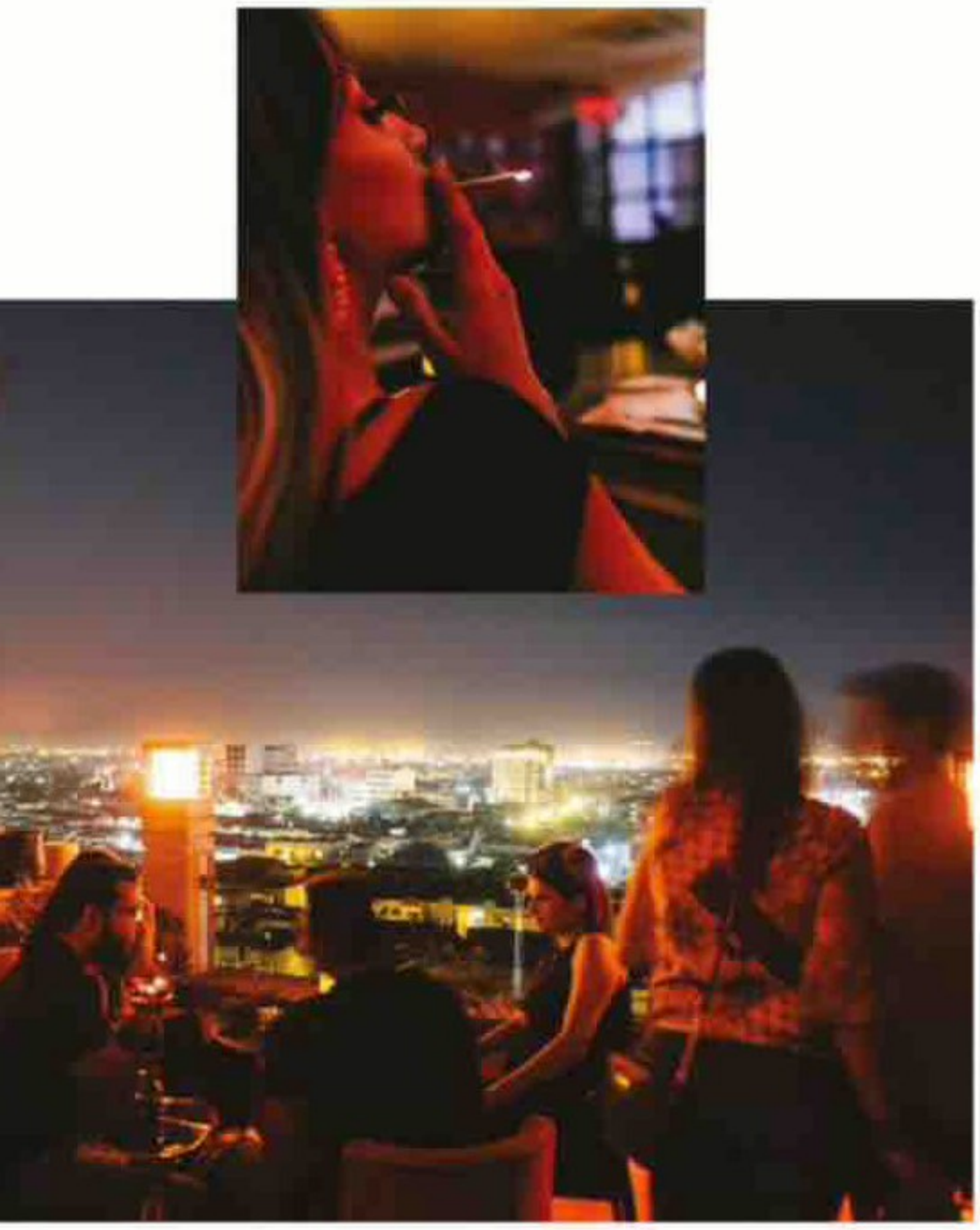
Still, Kurdistan remains a land very much steeped in tradition. At its best, honor motivates people to remain honest and fair in business transactions and in personal relationships so as not to bring shame upon family, tribe or community. At its worst, honor can be used to justify violence and repression. "Immoral" behavior such as sex outside marriage or even dating without the approval of one's family can result in steep punishments — including "honor killings" of those deemed to have insulted the family or tribe.

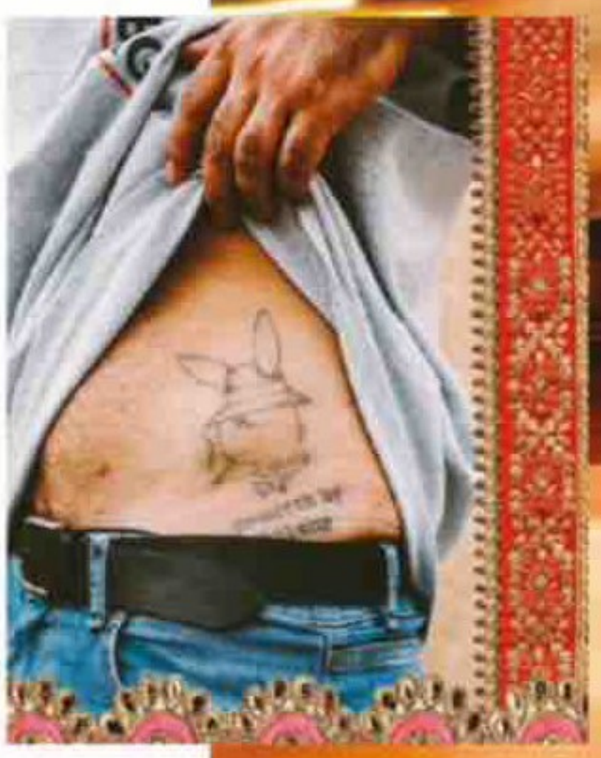
Needless to say, the region's LGBTQ community is distinctly challenged by local tradition.

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"In my tribe, everything is dishonorable," says Dante, a Kurdish college student and budding fashion designer who comes from a deeply religious and particularly traditional tribe. We meet at a café beneath Erbil's upscale Park View apartments. Dante wears a bandanna and a colorful patterned shirt unbuttoned to show off a silver pendant. He explains it was difficult for him when he reached his sexual awakening and realized he was gay. "There were definitely points when I resented myself for it, but I came to realize there was nothing wrong about it," he says. "I wasn't hurting anyone."







and social-media star Tara Fares as she drove her convertible in Baghdad. Fares, who split her time between Erbil and Baghdad, was one of Iraq's most popular internet personalities; she was deeply controversial for speaking openly about her divorce after an arranged teenage marriage and for displaying a fashion sense that her critics deemed sinful. Although her lifestyle brought her condemnation, several Iraqi women living in Erbil tell PLAYBOY it was likely Fares's increasingly outspoken criticism of conservative religious clerics that led to her death.

Fares's was the most high profile of several murders of female celebrities and activists in Iraq last year — along with countless nonfatal attacks. Not long after Fares's death, Kurdish model Jehan Hashim announced that she feared for her safety and was leaving Kurdistan, telling her followers on Insta gram, "I love my country and I hope to see change when I get back, good-bye Erbil."

That sort of danger means Erbil's bars and clubs tend to be very male spaces. Yet despite the social and physical risks, young women haven't stopped challenging tradition and pushing boundaries. Viyan says that in a way she has taken advantage of and even sort of enjoys — the lopsided gender representation in the city's nightlife. "To be honest, I like looking at men, and I like having them look at me," she says with a mischievous grin. It allows her to stand out in the crowd as a woman who dares to assert control over her sexuality.

Viyan explains that the women who venture into nightlife spaces have typically been Westerners working for international NGOs, local Chaldeans and Assyrians or particularly adventurous women from Iran. But, she adds, that's changing fast. "There are a lot more girls out here than there used to be, especially Kurdish ones," she says.

Others have noticed a shift too.

"Even four years ago, you just didn't see women going out and smoking *shisha* like now — forget about drinking. And the skirts are getting shorter," says one young Chaldean man visiting home from studying in the West. He adds that young men and women of all groups seem to be getting bolder in their pursuit of pleasure: "Coming back to visit, it almost seems like a different country. Kurdistan has changed."

• • •

American troops and contractors occasionally make their way out to bars and clubs, much to the chagrin of American officials presumably fearing unwanted attention. Last New Year's Eve, two U.S. marines and one Navy corpsman reportedly brawled with a Green

Dante grew up in Duhok, a city bordered by Kurdistan's idyllic mountains and close to hiking trails that attract tourists from all across Iraq. "It's a very conservative place," he says of his hometown. "The infrastructure there has gotten more modern, but the ideology hasn't changed much. People there fear change." He longed to go to Erbil, but when he arrived for college he was at first overwhelmed by the city's diversity.

That changed once he found his community. Today Dante is involved in the drag scene and, increasingly, LGBTQ organizing efforts. Although he's aware that there are people in Erbil who disapprove of homosexuality, he says they don't care enough to cause problems for the gay population. "People just don't mind you here," he explains. "They're focused on their own lives."

Dante has been designing clothes for a year and a half, fueled by a quiet but potent ambition: "I kind of want to break barriers here in Kurdistan." He says his family has yet to accept his passion for fashion design — let alone his sexuality. He's out to his friends but still absolutely not out to his family. He lives a double life, switching between Erbil and Duhok modes. "It really splits you in half," he says.

Kurdish women face their own challenges, especially those who live public lives. On September 27, 2018, a group of unknown gunmen killed Iraqi Arab model

Beret turned contractor outside an Erbil bar and are now being investigated in his death.

"To me, this bar is on Tatooine," says Matt, a scruffy American tech contractor who wears his silver hair tied in a pony tail. We talk as he pounds a drink at Ankawa's T-Bar, a rowdy sports pub. Most of the servers are young Filipina women (workers with roots in the Philippines, Bangladesh and other nations to the East are common here) and the crowd is a mix of locals, Western aid workers and contractors. An American flag hangs in the far corner. Matt came to Iraq eight years ago on a contract in the southern city of Basra and eventually moved north to Kurdistan. He has since traveled the region extensively and has an Iranian girlfriend.

Kurdistan's cultural complexities — and long-standing tensions — are never far from the surface in Erbil's bars and clubs. Most of the venues have armed security details, occasionally manned by battlehardened ex-militiamen who have fought against the Iraqi army, ISIS and others. Some have a reputation for harassing or denying entry to members of other ethnic and religious groups. Erbil isn't a war zone, but it is surrounded by war. There's hardly a single person living here whose life hasn't been touched by violence in some way.

When ISIS invaded Mosul in 2014, the Kurdish region was flooded with displaced people, adding to the already large number of refugees who had come from Syria. ISIS forces also invaded several Kurdish towns — coming close to Erbil itself — and waged genocidal campaigns against Yazidis and Christians. In 2017 the Kurdish government held a referendum on declaring independence from Iraq, leading to a brief military conflict between the Peshmerga (the region's de facto military) and the Iraqi army that resulted in casualties on both sides. Some Arab residents of Erbil reported facing harassment and even assaults from friends and neighbors during these conflicts, as well as lingering resentment long after.

And yet Erbil enjoys relative stability, which, combined with its proximity to combat zones, makes it an ideal place for foreign militaries to set up shop — and their presence is evident. The Kurdish government in Erbil is considered a key American ally, and the Peshmerga have received arms and training from the U.S. military since the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The roar of coalition helicopters flying overhead is almost background noise, and military contractors coming and going are a common sight at Erbil International Airport.

"It's a strange place where you have a mix of mercenaries and people who have survived the most extraordinary hardships," says Matt. "They've found a common culture here, and what they have in common is that they feel comfortable at the edge of the world."

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Kurdistan is in a constant state of change as its internal cultures and neighboring nations clash. Western politicians, academics and pundits have projected their own hopes, fears and values onto the region. But the people who call it home have to struggle to figure out what these changes mean for themselves and the people they care about — and how they'll go about their own lives and write their own stories.

"I know this double life will end someday," Dante says. He explains that he won't be able to hide his sexual orientation from his family forever — nor does he want to. And when the day comes, his family will have to either accept him or not. He says he's prepared to live his life without them if that's what it takes. But in a society that values family ties and honor and has yet to truly accept people like him, that could be a challenge.

In February a Kurdish LGBTQ activist tweeted at Kurdish deputy prime minister Qubad Talabani, challenging him on his beliefs about whether queer people in Kurdistan deserve equal rights and asking what, if anything, he had done to support them. "I believe all citizens, regardless of race, religion, gender (and or gender preference), ethnic identity and sexual preference deserve equal rights, all over the world, and especially in Kurdistan," Talabani responded. His tweet sent a stir across the region.

Dante says he knows politicians' words can be flowery and their promises fickle, and he's not so naive as to think anything is guaranteed. But the fact that anyone in a position of authority anywhere in the Middle East would make such a statement, openly and publicly, matters to him. Dante's response echoes the stirrings of countless denizens of this beautiful and complicated city:

"He gave me hope that this place can change."

Editor's note: Names have been changed for the sake of anonymity and safety.









Model **@PASTRYPRINCESS918**

Photography by **JESTON BRANDON @PERFECTLYFLAWLESSPHOTO**
MUA **@NICHELLEMUA**





Tell us something surprising about you.
Well I still sleep with my favorites stuffed animal tiger and she accompanies me on all my travels.

Were you excited to shoot in Playboy?
Growing up it was always a dream of mine but I thought only naturally blonde and blue-eyed women were accepted. I truly idolized blonde bimbos. Now I see that all beauty types are celebrated and it's so wonderful to be apart of that. My dream has come true and I am so honored and excited. This has been one of the highlights of this year and my entire career.

What inspires you?
Stories of average people that built empires from nothing in the face of adversity. Women such as Tina Turner and Marilyn Monroe and Gia Carnagi.

Why did you choose to pursue a career in modeling?
Actually, I always considered myself odd looking. But I was approached by people from modeling agencies when I was a child due to the popularity and rarity of mixed children at that time. However my parents were very conservative. When I was 15, I started modeling keratin treatments and such at hair shows. For the first time in my life I felt pretty because my thick, curly unmanageable hair was finally smoothed and straightened. That was my start. It's my goal to express my thoughts in any art form imaginable. Modeling is a form or self expression and a way to tell a story. When I was 18, I started stripping and glamour modeling. Lolita and Kawaii fashion are very little known in America. I want others to find comfort in kawaii fashion as I did. It's for rebellious but highly sensitive individuals who are childish and romantic at heart. Kawaii is all about expressing the cute and happy and colorful part of our soul that should never be silenced due to age. It makes some people happy to see color and cuteness in a serious world. Hopefully more people will discover the joy of delicate and feminine fashion and see beyond the mainstream modeling standard that relies on how big your curves are.

Who do you look up to in the modeling industry?
Venus Angelic who is a model and YouTuber. She embodies the spirit of kawaii fashion and is open about her mental health and body image struggles. She is not a conventional model. She is unique in every way and inspires many other delicate souls to be bold with their delicacy. Also, Bridget Bardot, Audrey Hepburn and Nagasawa Marina and Jenna Jameson.

What are some of your hobbies?
You should know that I have a mega sweet tooth! I love baking pastries and serving them to my loved ones. Oh and devouring them of course. Playing piano, dancing to French music, collecting gems and stones, writing poetry, reading the classics, and shopping are some other things I like to do.

Name three things on your bucket list.
Firstly, I would like to see the cherry blossoms in Japan. Second would be to go to a cathedral and experience the healing power of the vibrations from the bells. Third would be to amass enough of my own wealth so I can settle down to be married and have a beautiful home and children. That one is a tall order though.

Turn-ons.
Great sense of humour, kindness, good manners, hard worker, and strong values. I love passionate kisses on my neck and all over my body and a man who knows what he wants.

Turn offs.
Loudness, poor spending habits, cursing, crowded spaces, cigarettes and alcohol and anyone that doesn't appreciate Woody Allen.

Describe to us your perfect date.
A stroll in the park, getting a big bowl of hot and spicy ramen, cuddling and watching movie at home and making love all night.

Which world capital would you most like to visit and why?
Jerusalem so that I may dance on holy ground and thank the universe for my life.

What is your mantra?
I am worthy of unlimited love.







t h i s i s
y o u r
b r a i n
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p h o r i a

Neuroaesthetics sets out to understand what the human mind deems beautiful. Can we trust this new experimental field of science — and the corporations wielding it?

BY **DAISY ALIOTO**

Imagine waking up in an apartment expertly curated by a voice-controlled intelligent personal assistant. Everything from the artwork on the walls to the cutlery in the kitchen has been selected based on what your brain perceives to be most beautiful. The lighting is custom designed. It soothes you by appealing to Homo sapiens' earliest evolutionary memories: the tranquil hues of a savanna at sunrise. You are surrounded by verdant plants, of course, because humans find plants calming.

You walk into the bathroom and call up a playlist through a smart speaker that produces the crispest notes and zero white noise. The tunes excite you and prepare you for a productive day, and every time a new song plays, the reward center in your brain lights up. Your apartment's smart speakers also tell you when to eat breakfast; your refrigerator is stocked with healthy meals that have been exquisitely plated and chemically hacked to derive the same response.

You scroll through a dating app that has already selected candidates based on the physical features a brain-imaging study determined you find most attractive.

Your virtual assistant records the space 24/7 to help you tweak your environment. It tells you when to reposition the chairs to increase the room's feng shui. It tells you what you find interesting, what your brain finds beautiful, what is art.

Is this science fiction, or is life by design and hyperaesthetic curation a slightly exaggerated version of now? The term aesthetic, Greek in origin, entered the English language in the 1700s as philosophers grappled with how humans evaluate both beauty and art. As the field of psychology evolved, its tenets and the philosophical principles of *aesthetics* increasingly intertwined. When scientific understanding of the brain advanced — as when imaging technology allowed neuroscientists to observe brain activity — psychology and aesthetics were roiled. Suddenly, every human emotion had the potential to be triggered, mapped and recorded as data.

In 1999, neuroscientist Semir Zeki coined the term *neuroaesthetics*, launching a new field of inquiry into the connections between science and art. In the information age, the study of neuro aesthetics has boomed as academics apply what we know about the brain to centuries-old questions about how humans process beauty. Normally, the birth of a new academic discipline is cause for celebration — but some question the legitimacy of this nascent field.

"To suggest that the human brain responds in a particular way to art risks creating criteria of right or wrong," wrote Philip Ball, a celebrated science journalist and longtime *Nature* editor, in 2013. Another critique comes from philosopher Alva Noë, who argued in a 2011 *New York Times* op-ed, "Neuroscience, which looks at events in the brains of individual people and can do no more than describe and analyze them, may just be the wrong kind of empirical science for understanding art."

As the forefather of neuroaesthetics, Zeki hit back: "You will never have a complete theory of aesthetics unless you take account of the organ through which you have the aesthetic experience."

Let's take a step back and review the organ in question. We know that "our brains do not have a dedicated aesthetic or art module," says neuroscientist Anjan Chatterjee, director of the Penn Center for Neuroaesthetics as well as ChatLab, which sets out to "explore beauty, language, cognition and the brain." Rather, any aesthetic experience we have relies on a range of information collected by multiple senses.

A model developed by Chatterjee posits that the way we experience aesthetics is three-pronged: sensory, emotional and cognitive. When we see an object, the image of that object travels from our eyes to our brain's occipital lobes. This is the sensory response. Our emotional response occurs in the limbic areas of the brain, where the pleasure or reward centers are located. The cognitive response occurs partly in our temporal lobe as we contextualize the object within our stores of memory and knowledge. Education, culture and language all have an impact on the way we perceive and evaluate any one object. These parts of the brain are some of the same structures that regulate our enjoyment of food and sex. And yet evolutionary



Left: Milan Design Week has become a gathering of companies that use neuroaesthetics to create immersive brand experiences, such as the Lexus installation Leading With Light, produced with design irm Rhizomatiks.

theory can't fully explain what we deem beautiful or why.

That brings us to what we *don't* know about the brain. "The principles of mapping elemental and visual properties such as shape, color, movement and location onto their emotional tones have yet to be worked out," Chatterjee writes in his book *The Aesthetic Brain*. Despite the ability of brain imaging to peer inside our heads and assign data points to our brain's chemistry, "any kind of neuro-imaging study is very simplistic, really taking only one kind of task and acquiring some images of brain activity," says Martin Skov, a researcher with the Danish Research Centre for Magnetic Resonance. "The depressing way that neuroscience works is that you can form a picture of what happens only if you have a lot of studies you can pull together." In other words, neuroscience isn't capable of perceiving the subjective meanings (or the universal meaning) in individual objects or works of art.

And yet, many neuroscientists like to say that beauty isn't in the eye of the beholder; it's in the brain. If you talk to them long enough, however, they'll revise that statement. Indeed, every aesthetic experience we have is perceived with our entire body. "Your brain is not really for understanding art. The brain is for regulating metabolism and things that keep you alive," Skov says.

In addition to the sensory, emotional and cognitive responses happening inside the brain, the current state of the body is also crucial. Is the body cold? Is it hungry? This information doesn't show up on an fMRI.

"When you talk with people outside neuroscience, they can get quite annoyed that this is the criticism at the moment," says Skov. A designer recently approached him, wanting to know what color to paint hospital rooms to ease patient recovery. As Skov relayed to the designer, "It's not possible to predict on an individual basis how the individual person will respond to the same stimulus." It isn't sexy, but that's the scientific reality.

That doesn't mean we'll never be able to predict which environments the human brain prefers. "Studies indicate that aesthetic qualities of architecture have an impact on our mood, cognitive functioning, behavior and even mental health," states "Buildings, Beauty, and the Brain: A Neuroscience of Architectural Experience," a 2017 white paper co- authored by Chatterjee. A 2015 study found that open rooms and rooms with higher ceilings are more likely to be judged as beautiful. A different study suggests that curvilinear spaces encourage cooperation among people. Another one investigated the ability of some buildings to induce a meditative or contemplative effect. These studies are based on subjects viewing 2D images. Neuroscientists suggest that the study of 3D spaces will require even more refined scientific methods to filter out irrelevant factors.

You might think neuroaesthetics would avoid the tendency of new sciences to breach the popular culture as fact, but it's already happening. You may have heard that potted plants make apartment residents happier. This is part of the "biophilia hypothesis," and it's just that — a hypothesis. A 2011 paper coauthored by Chatterjee discusses "the hold that neuroscience has on the public imagination." Much as the wellness industry now slaps such buzzwords as *green*, *organic* and *sustainable* on products, marketers have taken the prefix neuro and run w ith it. Think of the Neuro line of energy drinks (one flavor, Bliss, promises its "neural-focused nutrients" will reduce stress) or software programs for patients with dementia. "Brain- fitness programs are examples of products designed with plausible scientific rationales," the paper states. "However, in these cases, commerce has moved ahead of the science. The marketing of these products often exaggerates or misrepresents the science motivating their production."

It's not only marketers who are gathering inspiration from the burgeoning field of neuroaesthetics; members of the traditional humanities have also played with its underlying principles. Ani Liu is an "experimental artist" and winner of this year's Princeton Arts Fellowship. Her work "examines the reciprocal relationships between science, technology and their influence on human subjectivity, culture and identity." This includes projects such as *Affective Induction Spa: Experiments in Programmed Emotions*, in which an art collective from the Massachusetts



Right: In March, online beauty brand Glossier opened a pop-up retail experience in Miami inspired by the city's Art Deco Historic District and featuring a mural by artist and mental health advocate Jacquie Comrie.



Above: The Museum of Dream Space, which bills itself as the "irst digital art museum," opened in Los Angeles this year. Inspired by Yayoi Kusama's Ininity Mirror Rooms, it's an example of experiential art merged with commerce.

"I don't think we can predict that people will use this kind of information in a completely ethical way."

Institute of Technology "used findings from science to induce emotional experiences of pleasure and happiness" in visitors at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Some were given a boneconduction sound massage, while others were tickled with feathers by students in lab coats.

Liu is open about the purely representative nature of this "experiment"; it's primarily meant to spur conversation about the possibilities of the field. "I think the placebo effect in and of itself was the most informative one. As soon as you sit down and we tell you this is scientific-induced happiness, you're already in a really happy mood," she says.

By comparison, Booker Prize – winning novelist A.S. Byatt was criticized for a 2006 piece in *The Times Literary Supplement* detailing her neuro- reading of John Donne's poetry. Chris Power, a literary critic at *The Guardian*, disparaged Byatt's theory that "Donne's poems are so easy to memorize because of his unusual way with syntax," which appeals to readers on a neural level. This "seems like the next ride in cultural theory's funfair of scientific misappropriation," Power wrote. Philosopher, poet and cultural critic Raymond Tallis was more blunt: "I find it impossible to make neuroscientific sense of this."

At the 2019 Milan Furniture Fair, Google and architect Suchi Reddy created an installation that examined visitors' experiences of built environments. According to a report in *Fast Company*, visitors wore bands with sensors that measured their biological responses to various room designs. Using an algorithm developed with Johns Hopkins University's Arts + Mind Lab ("a research-to-practice initiative for accelerating the field of neuroaesthetics") to graphically render biometric data such as heart rate and skin temperature, the creators were able to present participants with colorful postcards indicating which parts of the structure they found most appealing. But the technology around this is no more precise than photographs purporting to capture your aura.

Google's interest in neuroaesthetics raises ethical questions about the field's future applications being wielded by technology giants that traffic in data. The concerns are rooted in the rise of brain branding, or the use of neuroscience and neuroscientific data to design and sell products — a sort of commercialized hacking of the brain.

"I don't even like the word *neuroaesthetics*; I prefer the phrase *cognitive neuroscience of aesthetics*, because it has

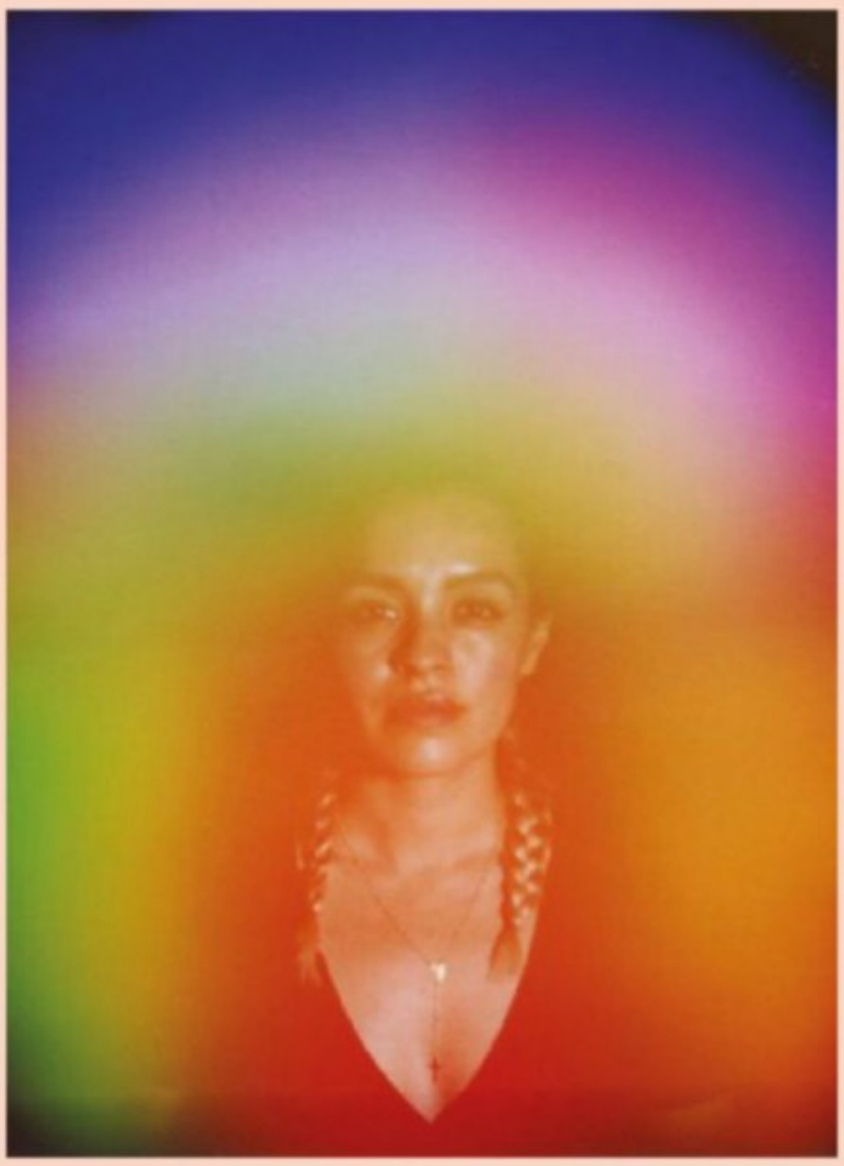
turned into this brand for just selling stuff that seems to be scientific but is really pseudoscientific," says psychologist Marcos Nadal. "It's generally used to give a scientific gloss to any statementthat anybody cares to mention about nature, design, buildings or art."

Of note, there are now "neuroaesthetics consultants." I ask Nadal about the handouts from the installation in Milan. "I think it's as harmful or harmless as giving people flawed psychological reports on their personality," he says, or giving Myers-Briggs Type Indicator personality tests to MBA students, which more psychologists have of late declared useless.

In 2008, a company called Mindlab International tracked customers' brain activity as they shopped at a T.J. Maxx store. According to *Business of Fashion*, the company found "significant increase in brain activity" when discounted designer labels were discovered among nonluxury brands. "Armed with this information, T.J. Maxx could design its store layout to maximise this 'treasure hunt' effect and attempt to trigger more moments of positive, purchaseinducing feelings," the article concludes. A designresearch collaboration called Acclair Art Valuation Service proposes to upend the art market by assigning a "neuro-value" to artwork as determined by a viewer's brain response.



Above: Bulgari partnered with Argentinian artist Tomás Saraceno for this Milan Design Week installation. Channeling neuroaesthetics, the piece explores "the connection between design, science and art."



Left: Aura photography, also known as Kirlian photography, can be traced to the 1930s but has become mainstream in the Instagram era. This photo is provided by Auradome, which "offers explorations of energy and color."

It's not hard to foresee a scenario in which simply the promise of neuroaesthetic insight will be enough to get customers through the door. Companies can mine customers data while simultaneously marketing to them. The transition from baiting consumers with Insta-genic environments to running actual lab studies is so seamless as to be unnoticed by most people. We're already primed to partake in these schemes as companies woo visitors to colorful pop-up "museums" or meditation retreats where every experience is sponsored by a wellness brand. Some already collect data — at Color Factory, visitors receive a QR-coded card that tracks the selfies they take in the environment — but they're brands with a limited marketing agenda. Unlike Google, they don't already hold the keys to our online identities. I asked each of the academics I interviewed this question: What would happen if companies used the allure of neuroaesthetics to learn more about customers than customers knew themselves?

"To my knowledge, nobody [in academia] is asking that," Chatterjee says.

Adds Skov, "I don't think we can predict that people will use this kind of information in a wholly, completely ethically sound way."

You wake up in an apartment that has been expertly curated by an intelligent personal assistant. Everything from the artwork on the walls to the cutlery in the kitchen has been selected by companies based on what they think your brain perceives to be most beautiful. You've been sold a life of pleasure. Are you happy? ■



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